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“LOOKING TO JESUS AT THE END OF THE RACE”

By Will Webster

The Christian life is like a race. At least, that's one of the ways the New Testament understands the Christian life. The athletic competitions of the ancient Greeks provided the writers of the New Testament with a common analogy that all could comprehend (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 2:16; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:7-8). Like a runner, the Christian must be in constant motion, persevering through all the pain and fatigue until they finally cross the finish line. For anyone that has ran competitively, especially in something as competitive as the Olympics (of which I certainly have not), knows that to run a race one must have great discipline and exert an incredible amount of effort to reach their final goal—*especially at the end of the race*.

What then is the runners' motivation? What keeps him running strong—even on the final lap? Perhaps the glory of accomplishment and victory? Perhaps to make a special someone proud? What about the Christian's motivation? Where is he to find motivation, encouragement, and an extra boost for the great race of faith? Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us plainly:

[Let] us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, *looking to Jesus*, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Looking to Jesus. That is the Christian's principal encouragement, the thing that inspires us to endure to the end. Seeing Him who was mocked, scourged, abandoned, and nailed to a tree, and yet faithfully and joyously “endured the cross” is what the eyes of faith looks to in a race. Jesus, of course, had trials throughout His whole life (Luke 22:28), but it was at the very end where endurance was most difficult, both physically and spiritually.

The same is true for the life of the Christian. The beginning of the race, though having its own difficulties, was rather easy compared to the end of the race. You had great joy when you came to know the Lord, great vitality in fulfilling all of your Christian duties. You found yourself gleaming with joy in Christ as you made new discoveries in His word, and it thrust you into a deeper love and commitment to Him. As God said of Israel, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown” (Jer. 2:2). Likewise, we find ourselves serving the Lord with more energy and vitality at the beginning of the race. But, as time goes on, and trials come and go, weariness and despondency can begin to set-in and slow you down—like weights strapped around your ankles. And not just the weights of weariness and despondency, but you are met with the temptations and sins of old age. But what are these “weights” and “sins” of old age? I would say at least four things: entitlement, complacency, bitterness, and affliction.

Entitlement

The sin of entitlement is a subtle sin. It often comes across as a joke: “*Well, I'm old, so I can say whatever I want now.*” This may indeed get a few laughs, but underneath such thinking is a prideful heart that thinks its earned the right to say a few off-handed comments, to speak rudely to the waitress, or to bluntly and sharply “speak their mind.” But such a privilege does not exist in the Christian life. After all, you never once see the Lord Jesus speak a harsh word to His enemies from the cross. He spoke sweet words of comfort to His beloved disciples at His final departure (John 13-17). He was someone who was admired for His “gracious words” (Luke 4:22), and could “sustain with a word him who is weary” (Isa. 50:4)—even on the road to Golgotha (cf. Luke 23:27-28).

Yet another form of entitlement is the thinking that—due to one's gray hair—they are now exclusively in the category of “those who teach” and not “those who are taught.” The Scriptures do teach us that there is wisdom with the aged (Job 12:12); and indeed, it is. That is why older women are commanded to teach the younger women (Titus 2:3-5), and not vice versa. Yet, this does not mean that older men and women are to stop receiving wisdom and instruction themselves due to their advanced years. As Solomon once said, “Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice” (Eccl. 4:13). Such entitlement and

pride do not belong to a life of discipleship. A true disciple¹ of Christ is one who humbly receives biblical instruction no matter who it comes from, and no matter his own position. He is a learner to the end, despite his/her honored position as an elder. Though Christ was “honored in the eyes of the Lord” (Isa. 49:5), yet He was never resistant to His Father’s guidance: “The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward” (Isa. 50:5). Or as Hebrews 5:8 puts it, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”

Complacency

The second “weight” and “sin” which hinders the old from running is complacency. A complacent heart is one that finds self-satisfaction in meagerness and personal deficiencies and gives no thought or effort in mending their ways. The complacent may say as their excuse, “*This is what I’ve always done. Why change now?*” They think that since this is the way they’ve always done things—even in their Christian walk—that there’s no point in changing their habits at this point in life. “Just as you can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” they say, “so also you can’t teach him to forsake old habits.” However, this also is far from the truth! The Scriptures nowhere indicate that just because a person has grown old means that they’re exempt from reforming. The Christian life marked by an ongoing inward transformation from “one degree of glory to another”: “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which *shines brighter and brighter until full day*” (Prov. 4:18). It is a daily denial of self (Luke 9:23) and a continual striving after the things of God (Phil. 3:12-15), to please Him and be conformed to His image. We are to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and...run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1). It is a race with no breaks, a continual war with no truce.

That’s why when we see the apostle Paul address older men, he says, “Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness” (Titus 2:2). He mentions six virtues, but the last of these virtues binds the first five together: “*in steadfastness.*” Steadfastness literally means, “patient enduring,” and it’s the same word used in Hebrews 12:1: “let us run with *endurance* the race that is set before us.” This means that up until the very end of their days, they are, and are becoming more and more, sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, and sound in faith and love. Unlike Ephesus, who “abandoned the love [they] had at first” (Rev. 2:4), they are more like Thyatira, whose “latter works exceeded the first” (Rev. 2:19). This is a characteristic of the righteous according to Psalm 92:14: “They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green.” They are those who look to their Lord as their example, and see Him “[enduring] the cross” till the very end, when He could finally say in triumph, “It is finished!”

Bitterness

The third “weight” and “sin” is bitterness. You can imagine in your head the couple seated together at a restaurant, not saying a word to each other, and both sharing an expression of displeasure and irritation. This is oftentimes not the result of a quick two-minute argument in the car, but a lifetime of unceasing criticism, unresolved conflict, and unforgiven sin. For many, whether they are married or single, this root of bitterness can grow unharmed and intact until it produces a sour fruit.

The Lord Jesus is yet again a wonderful example in this regard. The very people who mocked and provoked Him, scourged and pierced Him, are the very people He prays for—and not a prayer of vengeance, but one of mercy: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The best way of rooting out all forms of bitterness toward others is by remembering how great a debt has been forgiven from our account. Only then, and not till then, can we root out and put away the strong root of bitterness. Only then can we humbly bear with others in love, forgive any and all offenses, and act in kindness to the one who’s offended us. “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph. 4:31-32).

¹ Disciple literally means “learner.”

Affliction

Lastly, a “weight” in the life of an old saint is affliction. By “affliction,” I mean arthritic hands, wobbly feet, an aching body, a declining memory, etc. These physical and mental impairments often seem like a great weight that restricts these dear older saints from running the race that is set before them. For lack of “usefulness,” they grow weary and depressed. “*What good am I for now?*” they ask. “*Why doesn’t the Lord just take me?*”

O how older saints need to “look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of [their] faith”! Consider Jesus, crucified hand and foot to the cross. What more was there for Him to do, now? The hands that once served sick are nailed to the cross; the feet that once walked swiftly on errands of mercy are now fastened to a tree. What could He do now? *Pray*. He may not have had the use of His hands and feet, but He did have an ear in heaven. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). And do you know what happened soon after the Lord uttered this prayer? Pentecost happened, in which 3,000 souls were added in a single day! Never forget the power of prayer! You may not have the use of your hands and feet either, but like your Savior, you have free and open access to heaven—indeed, God’s very ear! I believe AW Pink’s words on Luke 23:34 are an excellent application to those who are sick and bed-ridden:

Who knows but what God is leaving you here a few more days to engage in the Ministry of Prayer—and perhaps accomplish *more* by this than by all your past active service. If you are tempted to disparage such a ministry remember your Saviour. He prayed, prayed for others, prayed for sinners, *even in His last hours*.²

And not only did He pray for the lost, but prayed for His very own whom He would leave behind in this dark and sinful world (John 17:11). John Flavel also gives wonderful application in this regard:

Look upon dying Jesus, see how his care and love to his people flamed out, when the time of his departure was at hand. Surely, as we are bound to remember our [families] every day, and to lay up a stock of prayers for them in the time of our health, so it [is good for] us to imitate Christ in our earnestness with God for them, when we die. Though we die, our prayers die not with us: they outlive us, and those we leave behind us in the world, may reap the benefit of them, when we are turned to dust.³

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us lay aside these “weights” and “sins which cling so closely,” and “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2)!

² Arthur W. Pink, *The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 10.

³ John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), 1:257.