

**(Heb 12:1-17)**

Like a good dark brew (of either coffee or beer), this portion of the book of Hebrews delivers the kind of “kick in the pants” that is always appreciated when the pressures and temptations of this life have got us feeling like compromise is the only option. This was the situation of Jewish (i.e. Hebrew) Christians living in the first century – the original audience of the letter. Scholars believe it to have been written sometime in the early to mid-sixties—the same time as the Neronian persecution. Per the edict of Caesar, all those claiming to be Christian w/in the Roman empire were open game to be tortured or killed. As a result, great temptation was placed upon the covenant community to temporarily turn away from the Faith – or least hide their Faith, until things got better. For the Jewish Christians, that meant going back to their former religion (Judaism). In their minds, this was both an acceptable alternative to Christianity and an accessible safe-haven from the raging Roman storm. The author of Hebrews however knew that such compromise was not only eternally dangerous, but largely due to wrong perspective. In other words, how these Jewish Christians were interpreting their Faith and current situation was very different from the view or vantage point of God. It is here then that the author expects us to feel the jolt back to reality. If you are beginning to feel like the Christian life is too hard, or that the preservation of God’s people will (at times) require a little “letting off the gas”, now is the time to take a sip of the following dark-brewed truths:

1. Countless saints have run the Christian race with faithful endurance until the end.

(1) = The “**witnesses**” he is referring to are those in the prior chapter (sometimes called “The Hall Of Faith”). It contains a list of those saints who stayed the course of faithfulness during their lives - i.e. who finished their spiritual races as winners. This BTW, the Apostle Paul says, is our only option in this life (i.e. we must run to win - 1Co 9:24). It is also how he finished the course of his life (2Ti 4:7-8). Regarding those the writer of Hebrews is referring to, there were more than a few who finished this way. We are instead “**surrounded by so great a cloud**”. IOW: Countless others have done (successfully) what God is now requiring of us today. (11:32) = More conquering saints than can be addressed. And the kinds of things they conquered were no small feat (11:33-38). Yet through all of it, they remained faithful to God. It is w/this in mind (then), that the writer of Hebrews can say “**let us run w/endurance the race that is set before us.**” = Like the countless others who have gone before, we (too) have the ability to stay the course of faithfulness during our lives, we (too) have the ability to persevere and conquer - even the worst of adversity or temptation, that may come against us and our Christian Faith. For those receiving this letter, that meant enduring what was already taking place - i.e. the tortures/persecution under Nero. For us (today), the worse we will likely ever face (in respect to our Christian Faith), will be a far cry from anything close to what they faced (e.g. loss of family/friendships). Regardless of what it is (or how severe), the writer of Hebrews (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) is telling us, *we can do it, we can “run with endurance”, we can run to win.* If they did it ---so can we. We too can become those the “world is not worthy of” - i.e. people w/o a price; who are better than anything this wicked world and our flesh could offer us - or threaten us w/, to pull us away from being faithful to God. This was the attitude of Christ - and as already discussed, what God is requiring/expecting of us today **(2-4)** (Mat 4:8-9 w/1Jo 2:15-17; Consider also: Phi 4:13; 2Ti 1:7; 2Pe 1:3).

That being said, success in anything requires more than simple potential – and that includes the Christian life. Though we have the potential to join a pantheon of the world’s greatest champions, that will never happen unless we do what the author of Hebrews says – before his call to endurance running. Like most sports, if you are to be successful, there is a checklist of items that must be in place prior to the race itself. This is especially true when speaking of endurance running. Given the long distance of such running (50-100 mi.), these items become imperative not only to winning – but even surviving (e.g. endurance runners need to consume between 100-300 calories and drink about 16 oz. of water per hour). In respect to spiritual endurance running then, we find two such items – both of which are not things to be acquired. As discussed, we already possess everything we need for life and godliness). Rather they are what we must leave behind. The author says we must “**lay aside** (lit. be done with/leave behind) **every weight and the sin that so easily entangles**”. And notice, our departure from these things does indeed come before (or is a pre-requisite to) the call/command to run. The analogy used by the author helps us to see this clearly since both items function as impediments to the running process (“weight” and something that “entangles”).

What else is worth noticing before moving on, is the fact that whatever these two things specifically refer to, they were absolutely things that those in the “Hall Of Faith” –those former Christian endurance runners also had to lay aside (or leave behind) in order to conquer the course. IOW: This is what they (first) conquered as the means to conquering far more. And what exactly that is – or the author of Hebrews is getting at when he uses the terms “weight” and “the sin that so easily entangles” is (I believe) one thing (rather than two). It is the weighty and entangling sin of ghetto thinking.

(Why I say that): The word (translated) **weight**”/“**encumbrance**” (NAS) refers to things that cause us tire out/wear down quickly; and the phrase “**the sin that so easily entangles**” - those sins which restrict our ability to perform. Placed together grammatically (as they are here), the difference between them becomes imperceptible (since those things which wear us out, are equally those that restrict/impede normal function). They are (iow) one and the same thing. In the realm of endurance running this would include not only possessing gear that is too heavy, uncomfortable or lacking in protection from the elements, poor food choices or water consumption, but also the possession of a wrong mindset. Studies have shown that an athlete’s biggest restriction and contributing factor to fatigue is oftentimes not physiological but psychological. In the words of ultra-marathoner and former Navy Seal David Goggins, “when your mind is telling you that you are done, you have only used 40% of your body’s reserves” (e.g. “The top-down influence of ergogenic placebos on muscle work and fatigue”, European Journal Of Neuroscience, 2008).

Here (then) we see at least secondary support for the idea that what the author of Hebrews is getting at is indeed related to some form of poor thinking. That such thinking was indeed (what I call ghetto) is discerned by considering in more detail the purpose of the book. As mentioned, the entire letter was written in an attempt to keep them from quitting the Christian life due to hardship and going apostate. And that b/c they possessed a mindset which valued only what is easy, pleasurable, accommodating and accessible. To put it another way, if it takes work or training, requires pain, demands excellence, delays gratification, or is not accommodating and easily accessible it must be wrong/the wrong path (e.g. 1Pe 4:12).

This (by definition) is what I call “ghetto thinking”. It the perpetual short-term mindset that has as its greatest impediment the inability/willingness to endure anything tough, tedious, tempting or long –all the things found on the runner’s course of the Christian life. That this indeed was true of the Jewish Christians the author is writing to can be seen by considering several texts throughout the letter (e.g. Heb 3:12-14, 4:9-16, 5:11-14 w/6:1-6, 10-12, 10:23-26, 35-39 w/11:1-6 [faithfulness to godly thinking, the value of l-term v. s-term reward; 7-12 – Noah in building the ark, Abe in travelling to a foreign land, Sarah in believing God for a child in her old age, 13-16, the same is true of everyone else on the list – l-term blessing outweighed s-term pleasure] = The entire book is devoted to the effect of l-term v. s-term thinking and a call to the Hebrews to endurance – which comes only thru the former!). This dangerous impediment of ghetto thinking sb painfully relevant to us today (e.g. the number of kids who have been “easily” excommunicated vs. those who have won people to Christ in the easiest mission field on the planet - schools). We (likewise) run the risk of not “running w/endurance” (though this is equally our potential). Laying it aside (then) is imperative.

The following reminders should help:

1.1. The gospel message you accepted, Jesus you promised to follow and kingdom you entered are completely antithetical to ghetto thinking (Mat 7:13-14, 13:18-23, 16:21-27; consider also 19:16-19 – notice, Jesus’ agenda is not to make things easier than they were before – Heb 13:8).

1.2. Countless saints conquering means that though it is hard, it is not (in the slightest) impossible or too difficult. If it feels that way, it simply means you are ghetto (Rev 7:9-10).

1.3. Forgetting that heaven was filled w/countless conquerors (of far more than ghetto thinking) is also a sign of ghetto thinking - i.e. short-term memory loss as it relates to redemptive history and that testing thru trials is how they are approved (**5-7**)(true even for Jesus -Heb 5:8).

1.4. Another sign of ghetto thinking is impulsiveness, or being guilty of “bottom-feeder” sins (i.e. illicit masturbation, looking at porn) since both reveal incredible low levels of self-control driven by a mindset that values quick, short-term pleasure that is easily accessible (Pro 28:21).

1.5. Becoming not only endurance runners for Christ, but also the kinds of people who find the cheap pleasures of this world not worthy of their time tells us that a big part of laying aside the ghetto mindset is gaining a passion for excellence, beauty and greater things (i.e. becoming a “Christian snob” – TBD next week).