

Articles and Sermons :: The Christian Race by J. C. Ryle

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“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-2).

Now, I say that the text contains five points:
 We have all a race to run.
 Many have gone before us.
 We must lay aside every weight.
 We must run with patience.
 We must be continually looking unto Jesus.

A Race to Run

First, then, we have a race to run. By this you are not to understand that our own right arm and our own strength can ever open for us the gates of everlasting life, and win us a place in heaven. Far from it: that is all of grace. It simply means that all who take up the cross and follow Christ must make up their minds to meet with many a difficulty, they must calculate on labor and toil and trouble, they have a mighty work to do, and there is need for all their attention. Without there will be fightings, within there will be fears; there will be snares to be avoided, and temptations to be resisted; there will be your own treacherous hearts, often cold and dead and dry and dull; there will be friends who will give you unscriptural advice, and relations who will even war against your soul; in short, there will be stumbling blocks on every side, there will be occasion for all your diligence and watchfulness and godly jealousy and prayer. You will soon find that to be a real Christian is no light matter.

Oh what a condemnation there is here for all those easy-going persons who seem to think they may pass their time as they please, and yet be numbered with the saints in glory everlasting! Are those who show less earnestness about their souls than about their earthly amusements, and those who have much to tell you about this world’s business but nothing about heaven, and count it much to give religion a few Sunday thoughts “are these men running the Christian race, and straining every nerve after the prize? I leave the answer with yourselves: judge ye what I say.

And those who profess to have entered the course, and yet find time to rest by the wayside and trifle with temptation, and those who stop to take breath and boast of their attainments, and look behind them “are such running the race set before them as if it was a matter of life and death? Oh no! They may get the name of Christians, but they are not so running that they shall obtain. But they who are taught and called of God may soon be distinguished from the sleeping children of this world. These have no leisure for vain amusements; their eyes are fixed and their thoughts are engaged upon the narrow path they have to tread and the crown they hope to receive; they have counted the cost, and come out from the world; and their only wish is that they may finish their course with joy.

Many Have Gone Before Us

The second thing you may learn from the text is this: Many have gone before us “we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses.” The witnesses here spoken of are those patriarchs and prophets who are mentioned in the eleventh chapter, and the apostle calls upon us to remember them and their troubles and take courage. Are we frail earthen vessels? so were they. Are we weak and encompassed with infirmities? so were they. Are we exposed to temptation and burdened with this body of corruption? so were they. Are we afflicted? so were they. Are we alone in our generation, the scorn of all our neighbors? so were they. Have we trials of cruel mockings? so had they. What can we possibly be called upon to suffer which they have not endured? What consolations did they receive which we may not enjoy? You may talk of your cares and business and families, but their portion was just like yours; they were men of like passions; they did not neglect business, and yet they gave their hearts to God.

They show the race can always be run by those who have the will. Yes, they were all flesh and blood like ourselves, and yet by grace they became new creatures; and so by faith they “obtained a good report” (Heb. 11:2); by faith they confessed themselves strangers and pilgrims on the earth; through faith they “subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the

sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: and others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormentedâ€• (Heb. 11:33-37). But grace exceedingly abounded, and all fought a good fight and finished their course and kept the faith, and to the God of gods appeared every one of them in Zion.

Take courage, fainting Christians â€œ you are encompassed with a great cloud of witnesses; the race that you are running has been run by millions before. You think that no one ever had such trials as yourself, but every step that you are journeying has been safely trod by others. The valley of the shadow of death has been securely passed by a cloud of trembling, doubting ones like yourself; they had their fears and anxieties, like you, but they were not cast away. The world, the flesh and the devil can never overwhelm the weakest woman who will set her face towards God; these millions journeyed on in bitterness and tears like your own, and yet not one did perish â€œ they all reached home.

Lay Aside Every Weight

The third point to be considered is the apostleâ€™s advice to â€œlay aside every weight.â€• By this he means that we must give up everything which is really hurtful to our souls. We must act like men who throw off all their long and flowing garments, as an encumbrance, when about to try their speed in running. We must cast away everything which hinders us upon our road towards heaven â€œ the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life; the love of riches, pleasures, and honors, the spirit of lukewarmness and carelessness and indifference about the things of God, all must be rooted out and forsaken if we are anxious for the prize. We must mortify the deeds of the body, we must crucify our affection for this world; we must look well to our habits and inclinations and employments, and if we find anything coming in as a stumbling block between ourselves and salvation, we must be ready to lay it aside as if it were a millstone about our necks, although it cost us as much pain as cutting off a hand or plucking out a right eye. Away with everything which keeps us back; our feet are slow at the very best, we have a long course to run, we cannot afford to carry weight, if we are really contending for everlasting life.

But above all we must take heed that we lay aside the sin which doth most easily beset us. I know of two which are always at our elbows, two sins which try the most advanced Christians even to the end, and these are pride and unbelief â€œ pride in our own differences from others, pride in our reputation as Christians, pride in our spiritual attainments; unbelief about our own sinfulness, unbelief about Godâ€™s wisdom, unbelief about Godâ€™s mercy. Oh, they are heavy burdens, and sorely do they keep us back, and few really know they are carrying them, and few indeed are those who will not discover them at the very bottom of the chamber of their hearts, waiting an opportunity to come out.

But there are particular besetting sins, of which each separate Christian can alone furnish an account; each single one of us has some weak point, each one has got a thin, shaking spot in his wall of defense against the devil, each one has a traitor in his camp ready to open the gates to Satan, and he that is wise will never rest until he has discovered where this weak point is. This is that special sin which you are here exhorted to watch against, to overcome, to cast forth, to spare no means in keeping it under and bringing it into subjection, that it may not entangle you in your race towards Zion. One man is beset with lust, another with a love of drinking, another with evil temper, another with malice, another with covetousness, another with worldly-mindedness, another with idleness; but each of us has got about him some besetting infirmity, which is able to hinder him far more than others, and with which he must keep an unceasing warfare, or else he will never so run as to obtain the prize. Oh these bitter besetting sins! How many have fallen in their full course, and given occasion to Godâ€™s enemies to blaspheme, from thinking lightly of them, from not continually guarding against them, from a vain notion that they were altogether cut off! They have been over-confident and presumptuous; they have said, â€œWe are the temple of the Lord, and we cannot greatly stumble,â€• and they have forgotten that hidden root, that branch of the old Adam; and so day after day, little by little, shoot after shoot, it grew, it strengthened, it filled their heart, it blighted their few graces; and suddenly, without time to think, they have slipped and fallen headlong in the race, and now they are hurrying downstream amidst that miserable party, the backsliders, and who can tell what their end may be? But what was the simple cause? They disregarded some besetting sin.

Go, child of God, and search the chamber of thine imagination. See whether thou canst find there some seed of evil, some darling thing which thou hast tenderly spared hitherto, because it was a little one. Away with it â€œ there must be no mercy, no compromise, no reserve. It must be laid aside, plucked up, torn up by the roots, or it will one day trip thee up, and prevent thee running thy race towards Zion. The gates of heaven are broad enough to receive the worst of sinners, but too narrow to admit the smallest grain of unforsaken sin.

Run with Patience

The fourth point to be noticed in the text is the frame of mind in which we are to run: "let us run with patience." I take this patience to mean that meek, contented spirit, which is the child of real living faith, which flows from a confidence that all things are working together for our good. Oh, it is a most necessary and useful grace! There are so many crosses to be borne when we have entered the course, so many disappointments and trials and fatigues, that, except we are enabled to possess our souls in patience, we shall never persevere unto the end. But we must not turn back to Egypt, because some bring up an evil report of the promised land; we must not faint because the journey is long and the way lies through a wilderness. We must press forward without flagging, not murmuring when we are chastened, but saying, with Eli, "It is the Lord: let Him do what seemeth Him good" (1 Sam. 3:18).

Look at Moses: "When he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward—he endured, as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:24-27).

Look at Job, when God permitted Satan to afflict him: "Naked," he says, "came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.... What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?...?" (Job 1:21; 2:10).

Look at David, the man after God's own heart, how many waves of trouble passed over that honored head; how many years he fled from the hand of Saul, how much tribulation did he suffer from his own family; and hear what he says when he is fleeing from his own son Absalom, and a certain Benjamite came forth and cursed him "Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life: how much more may this Benjamite do it? Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day" (2 Sam. 16:11-12). Mark too, as you read his Psalms, how often you come on that expression, "waiting upon God." It seems as if he thought it the highest grace a Christian can attain to.

Look lastly at your blessed Lord Himself. Peter says, Christ left us "an example, that we should follow His steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth: who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously" (1 Pet. 2:21-22). Paul says: "For consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him: for whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth" (Heb. 12:3-6).

O yes, beloved, we must run with patience, or we shall never obtain. There may be many things we cannot understand, much that the flesh could perhaps wish otherwise; but let us endure unto the end, and all shall be made clear, and God's arrangements shall be proved best. Think not to have your reward on earth, do not draw back because your good things are all yet to come: today is the cross, but tomorrow is the crown; today is the labor, tomorrow is the wages; today is the sowing, but tomorrow is the harvest; today is the battle, but tomorrow is the rest; today is the weeping, but tomorrow is the joy; and what is today compared to tomorrow? Today is at most but threescore years and ten, but tomorrow is eternity. Be patient and hope unto the end.

Continually Looking unto Jesus

The last point is the most important in the text. It is the object on which our eyes are to be fixed: we are to run our race "looking unto Jesus." We are to run, depending on Him for salvation, renouncing all trust in our own poor frail exertions, and counting our own performances no better than filthy rags, and resting wholly and entirely, simply and completely, upon that perfect righteousness which He worked out for us upon the Cross. We need not run uncertain of the end, we need not fight in ignorance of what shall follow; we have only to behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world, and believe that He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, and will soon present us spotless and unblameable in His Father's sight.

And then we are to run, making Jesus our Example, taking no lower pattern than the Son of God Himself, endeavoring to copy His meekness, His humility, His love, His zeal for souls, His self-denial, His purity, His faith, His patience, His prayerfulness, and as we look we shall daily become more like Him.

And then we are to run, looking for our blessed Lord's appearing, praying always with all prayer and supplication that He will hasten His coming and kingdom and accomplish the number of His elect. Unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation, and their vile bodies in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, shall be

e made like unto His glorious body, and they shall be forever with their Lord.

Oh, this looking unto Jesus! Here is the secret cause which kept that cloud of witnesses steadfast and unmovable in this narrow way! Here is the simple rule for all who wish to enter on the course which lands a man in Paradise! Look not to earth â€" it is a sinful, perishable place, and they that build upon it shall find their foundation of the earth earthy; they will not stand the fire. Set not your affections upon it, or else you will perish together.

Look not to yourselves! You are by nature wretched and miserable, and poor and blind and naked; you cannot make atonement for your past transgressions, you cannot wipe out a single page in that long black list, and when the King shall ask you for your wedding garment you will be speechless. Look simply unto Jesus, and then the weight shall fall from off your shoulders, and the course shall be clear and plain, and you shall run the race which is set before you.

Think not that you have anything which makes your journey more difficult than others. The saints at Godâ€™s right hand were perfected through sufferings and you must run with patience. Millions have gone safe through, and so shall you.

Beware of cumbering yourselves with any weight of earthly chances; examine your hearts most closely, and purge out each besetting sin with a godly prayerful jealousy. Remember that blessed rule, â€œlooking unto Jesus.â€ Peter did run well for a time when he left the ship to walk upon the sea to Jesus, but when he saw the waves and the storm he was afraid and began to sink. Thus many a one sets out courageously; but after a while corruptions rise high within, corruptions are strong without, the eye is drawn off Jesus, the devil gets an advantage, and the soul begins to sink.

Oh, keep your eye steadily fixed on Christ, and you shall go through fire and water and they shall not hurt you. Are you tempted? Look unto Jesus. Are you afflicted? Look unto Jesus. Do all speak evil of you? Look unto Jesus. Do you feel cold, dull, backsliding? Look unto Jesus. Never say, â€œI will heal myself and then look unto Jesus, I will get into a good frame and then take comfort in my Beloved.â€ It is the very delusion of Satan. But whether you are weak or strong, in the valley or on the mount, in sickness or in health, in sorrow or in joy, in going out or in coming in, in youth or in age, in richness or in poverty, in life or in death, let this be your motto and your guide â€" â€œLooking unto Jesus.â€