

The Focus on Christ

“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; who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1,2).

The race is on. One of the universal truisms of life is that it is a struggle or contest or race. Paul often uses this figure in describing the ongoing realities of life. The author of Hebrews has just given the readers some outstanding examples of the experience of faith among the people of God. Now He urges the reader on the basis of these examples and with the forefathers as spectators, to pursue their own lives as in a race, and to rid themselves of the impediments that would keep them from winning.

But what are these impediments? To understand this question we must focus on the readers to whom He is addressing this Epistle. We must remember that He is writing to the Jews. Some might well ask, “But is not all Scripture for everyone?” The answer must be qualified. In what sense is it for everyone? There are many instructions to the Jews of the Old Testament that are not applicable to us today as far as rules of practice are concerned. On the other hand, everything in Scripture is instructive in terms of how God dealt with His people and with the nations around them and with the world in general. In Hebrews 12:1,2 we have an example of words directed especially to the Jewish people regarding their own examples of faith, all of whom were indeed Jewish. One of the prevailing themes of the letter to the Hebrews is that they must not lose out as their forefathers did. In chapter 2 He urges them to regard salvation as an eminent necessity and not to let it slip by them as their forefathers did. In chapter 4 He uses the episode of their failure to cross over the Jordan as a prod to warn them of the risk of not entering into salvation through Christ. Thus, we are talking about those impediments which surround the Jewish people in terms of their traditions and teachings and which prevent them from receiving Christ as their Savior.

The constantly besetting sin. So the Greek text. The word for sin is *αμαρτια* (*hamartia*). It is a word that has more to do with the original state of sin than with trespasses or offenses, which is *παρραπτωμα* (*paraptoma*). The fact that the word is singular emphasizes this point. So we are really dealing with the sin of Israel in rejecting Christ and with the truth that apart from Christ there will be no atonement for sin. The people of God were surrounded by doctrines and traditions; biases and practices, that weighed them down and hindered them from finishing the race.

To apply this text to Christians in general would confuse the metaphor. The Jews were in danger of losing the race all together. The Christian wins the race by the grace of Christ alone. There are other passages in the letter to the Hebrews which seem to indicate that the salvation of the believer is uncertain and dependent upon human action. But if we see these passages in the same light as this one, and realize that the message was to the Jewish people and that it was warning them about carelessness in the matter of the acceptance of

Jesus as the Messiah, we clear up the confusion.

Looking unto Jesus . . . The Greek word ἀφοραω (*aphorao*) means to “look away from something and look to something else.” The Jews were being asked to focus on Christ instead of on their Jewish traditions and sacrifices. The only way that they could cross the finish line at all would be through the sacrifice of Christ. And that, of course, is also true for the Christian.

The Author and Finisher of our faith . . . Here again, the Greek words are instructive. ἀρχηγον (*archegon*) is more accurately translated “chief leader” than “author,” although He is also that. As Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and Joshua led them into the Promised Land, so Jesus leads them into salvation. The word translated “finisher” is τελειωτης (*teleiotes*) which has to do with consummation or fulfillment. Jesus not only begins our salvation, but also consummates it in us. Paul says, “*Being confident of this very thing that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:6). Paul is confident that Christ will get us across the “finish line.”

Obviously, there are many things in the course of daily life that can cause us trouble. It is certainly important for us to be vigilant in these matters. However, carelessness of conduct, while unacceptable as a standard, does not cause us to lose our salvation. When the Spirit of Christ comes in we are changed in our natures, to partake of His Divine nature. Spiritual birth is no more revocable than natural birth. The Spirit of Christ is always with us and does not leave just because we are having difficulty. It must be said, on the other hand, that carelessness in our practices in the flesh, can dull our sensitivities to the Spirit. The expression “out of fellowship,” is rather confusing. Christ is never out of touch with us, but our sensitivities to Christ may be dulled. In any case the essence of our salvation is the sacrifice of Christ and not our ability to “finish the race.”

For the joy that was set before Him . . . Once again, the Greek text clarifies the concept. The Greek word ἀντι (*anti*) means “in exchange for,” rather than “as a reward for.” Christ occupied the eternal realm of glory as a part of the Godhead, but volunteered to come to earth in the form of a human being and to endure the wretchedness and indignities of the human scene, even to ignominy of the cross, in order to be the “Captain of our salvation,” leading us back to glory with Himself, to share the glory of the Godhead forever.

Despising the shame . . . The Greek word translated “shame” is αἰσχυνω (*aischuno*) and means, literally, “without strength.” Christ disdained the kind of weakness that He would face as a human being in order to rescue us from the clutches of Satan. The suffering of Christ was not merely the time on the cross or at the trial. They included also the lifetime of distress and weakness that He had to face as a human being—emptied of his Divinity and trusting in the Spirit of God within Him.

At the right hand of God . . . This does not mean that there will be several thrones in Heaven. The expression “at the right hand of” literally means one who executes the will of the other. So Christ was the administrative hand of God. In Heaven we will see only one throne with Christ on it and Christ will be

the embodiment of all the Godhead. He is, at that point, something of the window on the world for the eternal Godhead.

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