

A Great Cloud of Witnesses

Part I

I have sometimes tried to imagine what it would be like to be an athlete competing in the Olympic Games.

I have been amazed, and awed, and inspired by the single-minded dedication displayed by the athletes who have competed in the Olympics Games during my lifetime.

The Olympic Games are special: they only come around every four years . . . the greatest athletes in the world are there . . . there are large crowds for every event . . . there are magazine, newspaper, and television reporters from all over the world . . . and there is a television audience that numbers in the hundreds of millions.

- a. All of that combines to inspire those athletes to give their all.

It would be hard to imagine anything that could add to the motivation of those athletes competing in the Games. But I have thought of one thing.

- a. Imagine, in addition to everything else, that the Olympic stadium is filled with former Olympic champions!
 - ▶ You look around you, and everybody in the stadium is a former Olympic athlete who won the gold medal in his competition!
 - ▶ Everybody in the stadium understands what you have gone through to get to where you are now: the work, the dedication, and the sacrifice . . . they know how you're feeling and they know what it takes to win.
- b. And now a stadium full of Olympic gold medal winners will watch you run your race!

The Lord wants you to think of yourself as being in that situation as you run the Christian race.

- a. **Heb 12:1-2 – Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

1. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses from the Old Testament period.

The heroes of the faith from the Old Testament period, who have received the crown of righteousness, are now looking on as we compete for the same prize.

- a. When the writer of Hebrews says, **“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us”** he's talking about those godly men and women he had just used as examples of faith in chapter 11.

- ▶ Abel . . . Enoch . . . Noah . . . Abraham . . . Sarah . . . Isaac . . . Jacob . . . Joseph . . . Moses . . . Rahab
- ▶ And then in vs 32-38 he says: (read)
- ▶ And in vs 39 he says: “And all these . . . gained approval thru their faith.”

2. With that great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, what excuse could we possibly give for quitting, or not giving it our best effort?

With Abraham looking on, could we possibly say that God demands too much of us?

- a. When Abraham was 75 years old he was told to leave his kinspeople and his homeland to go to a strange land. . .and he left without even knowing where he was going! (Gen 12:1-4)
- b. When he was 99 years old God commanded him to circumcize himself in the flesh of his foreskin . . . and he did it that very day! (Gen 17:9-11)
- c. As a test of his faith, God commanded Abraham to go to one of the mountains in the land of Moriah and there offer his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering . . . and Abraham left the next morning to do just that! (Gen 22:1-3)

With Noah looking on, could we possibly say that nobody could live godly in this wicked world?

- a. Read Gen 6:5-6, 11-13.
 - ▶ “the wickedness of man was great”
 - ▶ “every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”
 - ▶ “the earth also was corrupt. . .and the earth was filled with violence”
 - ▶ “all flesh had corrupted their way”
- b. But Noah “found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (vs 8), because he “was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God” (vs 9).

With Moses looking on, could we possibly say that choosing to stand with the people of God would cost us too much?

- a. Heb 11:24-27 -- By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, 25 choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, 26 esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. 27 By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.”

Or, with Moses looking on, could we possibly say that the murmuring and complaining, and the fussing and fighting among brethren is just too discouraging?

- a. Look at what Moses had to endure!
 - ▶ Ex 14:10-12 -- at the Red Sea
 - ▶ Ex 15:22-24 -- at the waters of Marah

- ▶ Ex 16:1-3 -- in the Wilderness of Sin
 - ▶ Ex 17:1-3 -- in Rephidim
 - ▶ Num 16:1-4 -- Korah's rebellion
- b. Even Aaron and Miriam, his own brother and sister, spoke against him (Num 12:1-3)

With Rahab and David looking on, could we possibly say that we cannot overcome our sins and change our lives?

- a. David committed adultery and murder (2Sam 12:9)
 - ▶ But David repented and returned to God's service (Psa 51 -- esp. vs12-15)
- b. Rahab was a harlot: any man for a price! (Josh 2:1)
 - ▶ But she became the mother of Boaz . . . and the ancestor of Jesus (Matt 1:5)
 - ▶ And James uses her as an example of faith (Jas 2:25)

With Joseph and Job looking on, could we possibly use unhappy, hard, adverse circumstances as an excuse for not serving God faithfully?

- a. Joseph and Job prove that you can serve God faithfully no matter what your circumstances may be.
- b. Joseph was a young man who showed great strength of character, even in his youth, in spite of terrible adversity.
 - ▶ He was hated by his own brothers (Gen 37:3-11)
 - ▶ He was sold into slavery (Gen 37:26-28)
 - ▶ He was imprisoned unjustly (Gen 39:7-20)
- c. And probably no one has ever faced harder, more tragic circumstances than Job.
 - ▶ In ONE day Job lost everything he had except his health, his life, and his wife (Job 1:13-19)
 - ▶ Then he lost his health (Job 2:3-8)
 - ▶ His wife played the Devil's helper and tried to get Job to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9)
 - ▶ His "friends" became his accusers (Job 22:1-9)
 - ▶ Everyone turned away from him (Job 19:13-19)
 - ▶ But through it all Job held on to his faith and his commitment to God (Job 13:15; 23:10-12)

Conclusion.

Abraham . . . Noah . . . Moses . . . David . . . Rahab . . . Joseph . . . Job . . . Sarah . . . Samson . . . Enoch . . . Abel . . . Gideon . . . Samuel . . . and many more.

- a. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us . . ."

There is no excuse for quitting.

There is no excuse for half-hearted effort.

Part II

3. But that great cloud of witnesses has grown since Paul wrote the Book of Hebrews, and now includes the heroes of the faith in the NT period as well.

There were men and women of faith in the first century who were just as devoted to the Lord as Abraham, and Moses, and Noah.

- a. And their example of faith is just as inspiring.

Some Christians in the first century were so dedicated in running the Christian race, and so devoted to the Lord, that they were willing to die for the cause of Christ!

- a. The apostle John tells us the early Christians “loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev 12:11)
 - ▶ Stephen died a terrible death by stoning -- Ac 7:57-60
 - ▶ James, the brother of John, was beheaded -- Ac 12:2
- b. Many Christians of the first century suffered even more horrifying deaths.
 - ▶ “All the world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them on fire, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them in the skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack; they were scraped with pincers; molten lead was poured hissing upon them; red hot brass plates were affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies; eyes were torn out; parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to lengthen the agony. These things are not pleasant to think about, but these are the things a man had to be prepared for, if he took his stand with Christ” (from William Barclay’s commentary on Matthew, pg 112).
- c. You must understand that the Lord’s command (Lk 14:26), and the self-sacrificing example of those early Christians, require that you give that same measure of devotion.
 - ▶ Willingness to die for the Lord is required of all in Lk 14:26.
- d. There are many Christian martyrs in the stadium now, and they are watching as you run the Christian race.

Some Christians in the first century were so dedicated in running the Christian race that they actually rejoiced when they were persecuted for the sake of Christ!

- a. Peter and John were jailed and beaten in Jerusalem for healing a lame man in the name of Jesus, and they were warned with threats not to preach anymore in His name.
 - ▶ But Luke tells us, “they departed from the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name . . . and they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Ac 5:41-42)

- b. Later, in Philippi, Paul and Silas were publicly stripped and beaten, and then imprisoned, for healing a slave girl possessed with an evil spirit.
 - ▶ But their fellow prisoners did not see Paul and Silas shrink into sullenness or despondency because of the unjust treatment they had suffered
 - ▶ Nor did they hear them rail and curse at their persecutors
 - ▶ Instead, they listened as Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God (Ac 16:25)
- c. Many Christians living in that terrible time were able to practice the Lord's teaching about persecution: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven" (Matt 5:11,12)
 - ▶ Some Christians of the first century were so devoted to the Lord that they were able to do just that
 - ▶ And now they're watching, and hoping that you will endure in spite of whatever persecution might be inflicted upon you.

Some Christians in the first century were so dedicated in running the Christian race that they joyfully accepted the seizure of their property!

- a. Christians living in that time worked at least as hard to provide for themselves and their families as we do. And many of them had to work much harder.
 - ▶ But when their belongings and property were taken from them in hostility against their faith, they accepted their mistreatment in a way that amazed and shamed their accusing neighbors.
- b. In the epistle to the Hebrews the Jewish Christians are praised for this very thing.
 - ▶ Heb 10:34 -- ". . .you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven"

Some Christians in the first century were so dedicated in running the Christian race that they sold lands and houses and other property in order to help their brethren in need!

- a. It's one thing to give to someone from the cash you're carrying in your pocket, or to write a check and deduct it from your checking account balance, but it's another thing entirely to sell a house, or a car, or a piece of land in order to help those in need.
- b. Many in the early church at Jerusalem had that kind of devotion to the Lord and to their brethren (Ac 2:44-45, Ac 4:32-37).
 - ▶ The Lord requires that kind of devotion of every Christian--Lk 14:33
 - ▶ And those early Christians are looking on, and they're wanting to see that same kind of love and selfless generosity in us.

Some Christians in the first century were so dedicated in running the Christian race that they devoted themselves to serving their brothers and sisters in the church!

- a. At Corinth, the household of Stephanas had “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” -- 1Cor 16:15, NIV
- b. At Cenchrea, Phoebe was “a servant of the church” and “a helper of many” (Rom 16:1-2).
- c. And Gaius was so hospitable toward the brethren that Paul refers to him as “my host and the host of the whole church” (Rom 16:23, cf NIV).
- d. Those early Christians were taught: “. . . by love serve one another” (Gal 5:13).
 - ▶ And many took the teaching to heart and lived it in their lives.

Some Christians in the first century were so dedicated in running the Christian race that they actually worshiped together and ate together everyday!

- a. This was the practice in the early days of the church at Jerusalem.
 - ▶ They assembled together in the temple every day for worship, and they ate their meals together in their homes (Ac 2:46, cf NIV).
- b. Togetherness certainly characterized the Christians of the first century church.
 - ▶ And it was a togetherness that grew out of their devotion to the Lord.

Some Christians in the first century were so dedicated in running the Christian race that they assembled with the church every time the church came together!

- a. Those who were devoted to the Lord devoted themselves to assembling together.
 - ▶ That is certainly implied in the description we’re given of that Jerusalem church (Ac 2:42-46)
- b. But consider the example of Priscilla and Aquila, too. A church met in their house (Rom 16:5).
 - ▶ Now doesn't that imply that Priscilla and Aquila had every intention of being at every assembly?! Sure it does.
 - ▶ If the church met in your house, where would you be? You wouldn't offer your house as the place of meeting in the first place unless you were determined to be there every time the church assembled.
 - ▶ And, in the first century, there were Christians in every city and town who were willing to make that same commitment.

I know that not all Christians in the first century were so truly devoted to the Lord.

- a. Without a doubt, in every congregation there were some who were lukewarm and half-hearted in their service to the Lord.
 - ▶ But they were not the Lord’s true disciples.
 - ▶ True disciples are just as dedicated as those I’ve talked about in this sermon. (If you have any doubt about that, just read Luke 14:25-33.

Conclusion

Many faithful men and women of the OT and NT periods “have fought the good fight, and have finished the course, and have kept the faith” and they have “received the crown of righteousness” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

- a. “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:1-2).

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A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Rom 12:1

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...”

Barclay on Heb 12:1

“The Christian is like a runner in some crowded stadium. As he presses on, the crowd looks down; and the crowd looking down are those who have already won the crown.”

“An actor would act with double intensity if he knew that some famous dramatic master was sitting in the stalls watching him. An athlete would strive with double effort if he knew that a stadium of famous Olympic athletes was watching him. It is of the very essence of the Christian life that it is lived in the gaze of the heroes of the faith who lived, suffered, and died in their day and generation. How can a man avoid the struggle for greatness with an audience like that looking down upon him?”

“No man would seek to climb Mount Everest with a pantechnicon of lumber weighing him down. If we would travel far, we must travel light. There is in life an essential duty of discarding things. There may be habits, pleasures, self-indulgences, associations which hold us back. We must shed them as the athlete sheds his track suit when he goes to the starting-mark; and often we will need the help of Christ to enable us to do so.”

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