

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 18, 2013
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Hebrews 12:1-13

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2) Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3) Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Fellow Christians:

Sporting events play an important role in our lives. Soccer and football practices have begun for high school students. The NFL pre-season is underway. Professional baseball is in full swing. There are activities for participants and spectators alike.

Athletics were an important part of life at the time of the Apostle Paul and the other NT Christians who lived at his time too. Paul's writings often compared the life of a Christian with the life of an athlete urging us to fight the good fight of faith or run in such a way as to get the prize. Although Paul most likely wasn't the inspired writer of our text it is filled with sporting imagery as it encourages us **run with perseverance the race marked out for us.**

Although the Scriptures often compare our life with the training and struggles of an athlete there is an important difference. The professional athlete has to draw on his own strength and skill as they train and strive to become champions. Since none of us are professional athletes it's safe to say that we would fail miserably if we were to try to accomplish some of the same things that look so easy on our TV's as we watch the professionals on TV or in the stadium. We just don't have the strength and skill. Our text reminds us that if it were up to us to complete the race which the Lord has mapped out for us that we also would fail. We don't have the ability to live the perfect life required of those who wish to gain heaven on their own merits. That's why we are encouraged to rely on the God's grace to us in Christ.

Theme: Run the Straight Race Through God's Good Grace

- 1. God's grace for the duration (1-3)**
- 2. God's grace for the struggle (1, 5-12)**
- 3. God's grace for motivation (2-3)**

Immediately before our text the book of Hebrews has called attention to some of the accomplishments of faith which the OT heroes of faith like Noah, Abraham, and Moses. What they accomplished was done only through God's good grace. By God's grace each of them completed the tasks he had planned for them and are enjoying the victory celebration which awaits the faithful in heaven. As our text begins it addresses us as if we are athletes and Noah, Abraham, Moses and the other OT Heroes mentioned in the previous chapter are in the stands cheering us on our way. "Don't give up!" those heroes would shout from the pages of Scripture. Keep on running. You're on the right path! But these OT heroes who have run the race of faith successfully can only encourage us they cannot provide us the strength and stamina we need for the duration of our race. That's where God's grace comes into the picture.

It's good for us take note of the type of race that lies before us – it's not just a matter of sprinting or jogging through the crises of life and then settling back into a casual somewhat aimless stroll the rest of the time. That

kind of a life wouldn't need the perseverance and endurance which is called for in our text as it urges us to keep on running the race which is marked out for us.

The race of faith is not some 100 yard dash, but a life long marathon – one in which we need to run full out every step of the way. Athletes don't always play full out. There are lots of instances where the outcome of an event is already pre-determined and the athlete simply saves their energy for another day. That strategy won't work in our lives as Christians. We are encouraged to get rid of the weights and the burdens which might impede our progress and slow us down. Perhaps the writer of this text had in mind the runners of his day who wore only the scantiest of coverings as they ran.

Sin and temptation threatens to tangle our feet as we run. The OT heroes of faith certainly faced these temptations too. In the previous chapter we read that (Hebrews 11:25) **Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.** For Moses that meant resisting all the temptations of power, luxury and prestige associated with being the step-son of a princess in the court of Pharaoh.

Those may not be the same temptations which we wrestle with – but there will be temptation assailing us every step of the way. That's why we need **God's grace for the duration.**

And that grace has been provided for us in Christ. Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith became one of us to furnish our salvation. He's the one who is the object and the cause of our faith – giving us something to believe as well as the faith to do so. **For the joy set before him [he] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3) Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**

Jesus carried our sins to that cross and he paid the complete penalty for those sins as an evidence of God's grace. He completed everything that was needed for our salvation. He declared his victory and ours when he declared, "It is finished." The shame involved was outweighed by the joy he found in completing his the work his Father had prepared him to do. He looked ahead to his glorious exaltation and to sharing eternal glory with those he redeemed. We are urged to consider Jesus as we struggle to endure until the day when our Lord will say to us: **"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. (Matthew 25:34)**

Since his victory assures us of our victory, his endurance not only provides us an example to follow but power to pick up the pace and lengthen the stride on the track to heaven even when the going seems almost impossible.

We can run the straight race with God's grace for the duration and with God's grace for the struggle. (1, 5-12)

Our text speaks of the struggles that may confront Christians and reminds us that God's grace is evident even as we cope with those struggles. First of all God's grace is evident in the fact that he often limits the struggles we must endure. Christ shed his blood and gave his life for us. Many have been asked to give their lives for him as Christian martyrs. But that wasn't the case for the Hebrew Christians and it hasn't been the case for us: **4) In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.**

In the future we might be called upon to give our life rather than abandon our faith in Christ Jesus. But for now our struggle against sin has not reached that point because of God's grace. But the author of our text isn't just saying that we should endure because things aren't as bad as they could be. God's grace is even evident in the midst of our struggles. The Hebrew Christians were about to abandon hope because they had forgotten something God had told them in the book of Proverbs where he explained how he deals with his children.

You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6) because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

At times God himself allows suffering to enter our lives to discipline us and lead us to maturity. At other times the suffering comes from the hand of an enemy but God controls and limits it to suit his purpose of drawing us closer to him. Our loving Father assures us that because of his grace to us in Christ: **that in all things God is working for the good of those who love him.** So we are urged not to lose heart or to make light of the Lord's rebuke and discipline. God never forsakes his own. When he tests; he strengthens and toughens us. In his grace he assures us: You will not be tempted above what you are able but when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so you can stand up under it.

Confidence in God's grace and love is the appropriate response to the sufferings we are called upon to endure. Loving fathers, as the head of the household, will join together with loving mothers to disciple their children. As children we don't always appreciate this but it is for our good. At times this discipline, like the Lord's discipline, can be painful – that is when we need to bear in mind that his purpose is love and that his grace will enable us come away from the struggle into the peace of heaven.

7) Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ... 9) Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! 10) Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11) No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

God's grace is evident as he limits and keeps struggles away from our lives and as he provides the ability to overcome those struggles and to share in his holiness.

Lastly God's grace is evident as it provides us the motivation to run the straight race with God's good grace.

We began our discussion of this text by pointing out our inability to run the perfect race that God requires of us. It's important for us to remind ourselves of this once again at this point as we speak about the motivation for running the race. Convinced that we are unable to run that race on our own we will recognize that our motivation isn't trying to win a prize on our own. Rather since God's grace has provided the victory to us in Christ – our motivation is expressing our appreciation for that grace extended to us in Christ. And so we fix our eyes on Jesus and his grace to us as we run the straight race through the hardships of this life to the glory which he has won for us.

Mindful of his grace to us we will gladly set aside sin and resist temptation and we will willingly accept God's loving discipline.

**Run the straight race Through God's good grace;
Lift up your eyes and seek his face.
Life with its way before us lies;
Christ is the path and Christ the prize.**

**Cast care aside, Lean on your guide;
His boundless mercy will provide.
Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove
Christ is its life and Christ its love.**

**Faint not nor fear; His arms are near.
He changes not, and you are dear.
Only believe, and you will see
That Christ is Lord eternally. Amen.**