

The shaking of Mount Sinai (Ex. 19.18) was deeply rooted in their national memory (as in Ps. 68.7ff). But the time is coming when the whole created order will be dissolved. Then we will be left with “the kingdom that cannot be shaken” – and so we should “be thankful and worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (v. 28).

- “Witnesses” in v. 1 is the Greek word from which our word “martyr” comes – restricting the meaning to those who have died for their faith. A witness is a person who lives out their faith and who testifies to the truth in which they believe. The witnesses aren’t just in the stands, but on the track! Jesus has called us to be his “witnesses” (Lk. 24.48; Acts 1.8). What does this mean? What are his expectations of us?
- Thinking again about John Akhwari, what have we learnt in Hebrews 12 to help us “finish the race”?



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

by Peter J Blackburn

9. The Race is On!

Reading: Hebrews 12

In 1968, the country of Tanzania selected John Stephen Akhwari to represent it in the Mexico City Olympics.

Along the course for the marathon, Akhwari stumbled and fell, severely injuring both his knee and ankle. By 7 pm, a runner from Ethiopia had won the race, and all the other competitors had finished and been cared for. Just a few thousand spectators were left in the huge stadium when a police siren at the gate caught their attention.

Limping through the gate came number 36, Akhwari, leg wrapped in a blood-stained bandage. Those present began to cheer as the courageous man completed the final lap of the race.

Later, a reporter asked Akhwari the question on everyone’s mind, “Why did you continue the race after you were so badly injured?”

He replied, “My country didn’t send me 7,000 miles to begin a race; they sent me to finish the race.”

- Reflect on John Akhwari’s statement – “My country did not send me 7,000 miles to begin a race; they sent me to finish the race.” Another similar sporting story is recorded in the film, “Cool Runnings.”
- Although a good Jew would never participate in Greek athletic games (the Greek word *gymnasium* comes from *gymnos* meaning “naked”), Paul found some of the concepts of the games, and especially “running the race”, a valuable metaphor for the Christian life. Consider what he says in Phil. 3.12-14 and 2 Tim. 4.6-8.

Read: Hebrews 12.1-3.

The picture is taken from the games. The crowd is in the stands. However, the “great cloud of witnesses” aren’t citizens not fit enough to compete. They are the people who have successfully completed the race – the “heroes of the faith” described in chapter 11. Their life of faith and endurance encourages us forward and cheers us to go on.

The message is coming through again – “don’t turn back!” We are to ‘run with perseverance the race marked out for us.’ The word translated ‘perseverance’ also means ‘patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness.’ We have started out on the race – the race we are meant to be running. Don’t give up!

We can’t wear a big heavy coat in a race. The athletes even take off the light modern track-suit. In the same way, we have to throw off, not only ‘the sin that so easily entangles,’ but ‘everything that hinders.’

Following the KJV, there has been a tendency to talk – almost to excuse – our ‘besetting sin.’ True, we have been forgiven, but now we need to throw it off – it has no rightful place and will only hinder our lives. But there may be other things we do that we justify because they don’t fit a strict definition of ‘sin’ – perhaps a habit, a use of time or money, a fear, an attitude... The issue is – does it hinder us in the race of faith? Throw it off!

Chapter 11 was about people who believed God’s promises before they were fulfilled. For us, in our race of faith, our eyes can be firmly fixed on the fulfilment – on Jesus, ‘the author and perfecter of our faith.’ He has gone ahead of us. His once-for-all sacrifice fulfils the promise. But he isn’t only ahead of us – at the finishing line. He is also alongside us to complete and perfect his work in us. So... don’t ‘grow weary and lose heart.’

- “Everything that hinders... the sin that so easily entangles.” How are we running? What could prevent us from running the race with perseverance? What can we do to throw off these things?
- Please consider... Jesus! How do we keep Jesus as the focus of our life?

Discipline

Read: Hebrews 12.4-13.

Athletes don’t become Olympians overnight. We hear of their years of preparation, hours of rigorous daily training, dietary denial, social restriction... – all because they are practising for a goal. But we aren’t practising – the race is on! How much more important to accept and maintain discipline in the race of faith.

In 10.32-34, they were reminded of the earlier days as they faced suffering and stood alongside those who were being persecuted. Up to now, they haven’t resisted to the point of death (12.4).

They are to accept their present ‘hardship’ as the Father’s discipline (v. 7) – equipping them further for the life of faith, producing ‘a harvest of righteousness and peace’ (v. 11).

So... stay in the race – ‘strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees’ and make the path safe for all (vv. 12-13). This isn’t a race to determine one winner, but where everyone can complete the course.

- Does God deliberately send “hardship” to discipline us? Or does he use hardship to discipline us?
- If God hasn’t sent hardship on us, how does it affect our attitude when we accept it as part of God’s training?

No Turning Back

Read: Hebrews 12.14-29.

‘Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord’ (v. 14). So we are to be peace-makers, yet not by making easy compromises to avoid opposition. In the final count, we are called to holiness – we belong to the Lord, no matter what the cost.

On the one hand, we need to avoid a Pharisaic attitude which misses the grace of God and causes bitterness and trouble (v. 15). On the other hand, we are to avoid relapse into immorality and godlessness (vv. 16-17).

Our faith has brought us, not to Mount Sinai where the Law was given (vv. 18-21), but to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the assembly of angels, to the church of the firstborn... But even more than all this, we have come to God the Judge of all people and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant which has been sealed in his own blood that speaks forgiveness – unlike Abel’s which spoke judgment (vv. 22-24, Gen. 4.10).

‘See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks’ (Heb. 12.25a). This takes us back to chapter 2 – ‘We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?’ (2.1-3) And in the present passage – ‘If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?’ (12.25b).

‘But if it was from an earthly hill that God proclaimed the statutes that formed the basis of the old covenant, it is from the heavenly Zion, from his unseen throne, that he speaks in the gospel. The ‘how much more’ argument of 2.2ff and 10.29 is pressed home again: to disobey the gospel incurs judgment more certain and terrible than that incurred by disobedience to the law’ (FF Bruce).