Article

• *The race, the fight and the warfare*
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In Hebrews 12:1-2 we read:

“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 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.”

We are called in this passage to run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and the finisher of our faith. The passage presents our Christian walk, our Christian life, as a race that we need to run:

1) with patience, and
2) looking unto Jesus, who is the author and finisher of our faith.

Paul in another place, in Philippians this time, speaks again about the race. There we read:

Philippians 3:12-14

“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul didn’t count himself as already having attained the prize. Instead he was dismissing those things that were behind pressing toward the prize of the upward call
of God in Christ Jesus. There was a goal to be attained, a prize to be received. Paul didn’t consider this prize as already received. Instead he focused his life to receive this prize. He was **goal oriented** with the goal being the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul speaks again about the race and the prize in I Corinthians 9:24-27. There we read:

I Corinthians 9:24-27

“Do you not know that those who run in a **race** all run, but one receives the **prize**? **Run in such a way that you may obtain it.** And everyone who competes **for the prize** is temperate in all things. Now they **do it** to obtain a perishable crown, but we **for an imperishable crown.** Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as **one who** beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring **it** into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

Paul was running a race aiming at an imperishable crown. His life was goal oriented and His goal was the imperishable crown to be received from the hands of the Lord. He wouldn’t allow anything else to interfere with this aim. He was not running with uncertainty. He knew His goal and He was sure for the prize waiting for him. As the athletes discipline themselves having in mind their goal of winning their own races, so also Paul was disciplining his body, paying attention that while he preached other, he himself would not become disqualified. The race that Paul was running, was not only for Paul though. We run in the same race too. The same crown, the same prize is waiting for us too.

Moving further, the race we are to run is also presented as a fight in the above passage of I Corinthians. Paul is speaking about it in other places too. One of them is I Timothy, where Paul giving instructions to Timothy, he writes:

I Timothy 6:12

**“Fight the good fight of faith,** lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”**
There is a good fight, the good fight of faith, that we have to fight. Also in his letter to Galatians, Paul wondering about their state of faith writes:

Galatians 5:7-10

“You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is.”

They were running well but not any longer. Somebody hindered them, troubled them. It appears therefore that in the race there is also a competitor, somebody that does not want us to run it well, and if possible, not to run it at all.

Paul speaks again about the race and the fight in II Timothy 2:3-5:

II Timothy 2:3-5

“You therefore endure hardship, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who has chosen him to be a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”

The race becomes a fight and the fight becomes warfare. The athlete is also a soldier and the soldier is also a fighter. And a good soldier must learn to endure hardship.

Summarizing the above we can draw a picture of a good runner of the race, or a good soldier:

So, the good soldier or runner:

i) Runs the race with patience. As Barnes in his commentary explains this:
“The word rendered “patience” rather means in this place, perseverance. We are to run the race without allowing ourselves to be hindered by any obstructions, and without giving out or fainting in the way. Encouraged by the example of the multitudes who have run the same race before us, we are to persevere as they did to the end.”

ii) He is goal oriented and his goal in life is not to make life as more comfortable as possible but to get the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

iii) He doesn’t run with uncertainty. He doesn’t bit the air. In front of his eyes he has his goal, the prize, the imperishable crown. As Barnes again explains:

“Not as uncertainly - (οὐκ ἀδήλως ouk adelos). This word occurs no where else in the New Testament. It usually means, in the Classic writers, “obscurely.” Here it means that he did not run as not knowing to what object he aimed. “I do not run haphazardly; I do not exert myself for nothing; I know at what I aim, and I keep my eye fixed on the object; I have the goal and the crown in view.”

(iv) He disciplines himself and he knows very well that he himself may become disqualified. Concerning the danger of disqualification, Paul tells us in II Corinthians:

II Corinthians 13:5

“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? - unless indeed you are disqualified.”

The good runner, examines himself, checks himself to see whether he is in the faith. He tests and disciplines himself.

iv) Moving further, the good soldier does not entangle himself with the affairs of this life, in order to please the one that he has chosen him. We can’t be soldiers of Jesus Christ and at the same time have our full interest in our own businesses. When there is
a call up for soldiers, they leave back their businesses, farms, shops and go to war. This now does not mean that becoming soldiers of Jesus Christ we must leave our occupations. Paul himself was making tents to earn his living. But we must not be “entangled”, fully devoted, pre-occupied with it. As the Matthew Henry’s commentary of the whole Bible says:

“The great care of a soldier should be to please his general; so the great care of a Christian should be to please Christ, to approve ourselves to him. The way to please him who hath chosen us to be soldiers is not to entangle ourselves with the affairs of this life, but to be free from such entanglements as would hinder us in our holy warfare.”

In other words I would say, certainly we have occupations in which we work or obligations that we need to take care of. BUT we must not be entangled, caught up, overoccupied, with all these. These are not the aim that we are here. What we are here for is to please our General, to be good soldiers of JESUS CHRIST. We are in a warfare and we must not settle down like we are not!

Expanding on this, as the Lord Jesus Christ said in the parable of the sower, the cares of this world, the deception of riches and the pleasure of life – i.e. the entanglements with the things of the world Paul is speaking about - make the Word of God unfruitful. In this parable many started well. The Word of God was sown and sprang up in many hearts. Yet it was only the last category that gave fruit. This also shows that the number of those that finish the race fruitfully is not necessarily equal to the number that started it. Let’s have a look at the interpretation the Lord gave to his parable:

Luke 8:11-15

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. "Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. "But the ones on the rock are those who, when they
hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in
time of temptation fall away. "Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who,
when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life,
and bring no fruit to maturity. "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those
who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with
patience.”

The second and third category started well but they didn’t finish well. To start
the race is not therefore the only important thing. After you have started it, what is the
most important is to keep up running it. And the only way to keep up is to run it with
patience, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. Fighting the fight,
aiming to please our General and not entangling to the affairs of this life. There is a
misconception that becoming a Christian means a ticket to an easy life, full of
pleasures. The word “blessings” has come to mean God will grant you whatever you
are pleased with. Easy life has in many cases become the aim. We must pay attention
that it will not become our aim. Our aim here is to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and
entanglements, focus, on the things of this world can do only one thing: make the seed
sown to our hearts unfruitful.

Our aim in this life is not to satisfy the definition of society of a successful guy.
If Paul and Peter and the other faithful folks were living today they would not be
valued much by the society. Paul left all the earthly privileges that he had, all that his
society recognized as valuable, in order to gain Christ. As he tells us in Philippians
3:4-11

Philippians 3:4-11

“though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have
confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of
the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;
concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the
law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for
Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

There were a lot of things that Paul had attained before he became a Christian. Paul was somebody that his society honored. He was a “successful” guy, according to the definitions of his society, of the world. Yet he counted all these as rubbish that he may gain Christ.

To become fruitful in Christ, we must endure hardship, we must endure temptation and we must give up having confidence on riches or our own power. If we became Christians only to become a little more wealthy or a little more better off than our neighbors or to avoid this and that hardship, or to get a little more “blessings” then we have understood things wrong. As Paul says in I Corinthians 15:19

“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable”

If we only trust in Christ for this life, if our focus of trust is this life, then we are most pitiable of all men. Instead our purpose in this life, is to please the One that called us: the LORD JESUS CHRIST. He is our General, the author and finisher of our faith and we will only run the race if we run it patiently, having our eyes focused ON HIM.

Jesus Christ didn’t promise a “you will have it all” life. He invited us to take up our cross (Mark 8:34). He indeed promises blessings, but he also speaks about hardship. There is a prize but also a race. A crown but also a fight. And there it is where we need patience and to have the right focus. It is much more easier to run down a hill than to run it all the way up. To run down require very little goal orientation: the legs themselves drive you. But to run up you need patience and to be focused on the
goal. Without this you might settle for sitting by the way and spending your life there. All the four categories started well, but only the last category chose to carry on running up the hill. They were the “ones that fell on the good ground … having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.” They bore fruit with patience after having heard the word with a noble and a good heart. Set as your goal the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Set as your goal to please God, to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ, whatever this takes. You have tested and see that God is good. Focus therefore your life on Him.

**The race: the competitor**

As we saw previously, the Christian life is presented as a fight. Also reading in Galatians previously, we saw that they were running well but somebody hindered them in their race. Also we saw that temptation, the deception of riches, the cares of this world and the pleasures of life made the second and third categories of the parable of the sower unfruitful. We can also see in the same parable that the first category lost the sown to them Word of God because the devil came and took it away. It must be obvious from the above that the race is not a run alone race. There is also a competitor in this race. There is somebody that does not want us to finish the race successfully. He opposes our aim and wants us to stop reaching the goal. In other words, there is an enemy!

Ephesians 6 speaks about our struggle with this enemy:

Ephesians 6:10-12

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in
the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand”

This passage as well as the verses that follow it describe the struggle between us and the enemy. Paul does not start straight away with the description of the struggle. Instead he starts it with an invitation: the invitation to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. There is none as the Lord. It is not our power that can overtake the enemy. It is the power of His might and we must be strong in this power. And the invitation continues with calling us to put on the whole armor of God. Fighters have armors and we as soldiers of Jesus Christ have an armor too. And the armor has a purpose: that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. The enemy is the devil and he is wily. And the passage continues telling with whom we wrestle: not against men, not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and the rules of the darkness of this age. We wrestle against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. There is an enemy therefore to whom we have to stand against, a fight we have to fight and an armor we must put on.

Verses 14-18 describe this armor:

“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints”

God has given us this armor and we need to take it up and put it on, in order to be able to fight the fight against the enemy.
Further descriptions and instructions concerning our competitor in the race are also given in 1 Peter 5:8-11. There we read:

1 Peter 5:8-11
“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

The devil is our adversary, our opponent. He walks around and his aim is brutal: he wants to devour us. That’s why the Word of God tells us to be sober and vigilant. As the Matthew Henry’s commentary of the Bible comments on these two words:

“it is their (Christians’) duty, 1. To be sober, and to govern both the outward and the inward man by the rules of temperance, modesty, and mortification. 2. To be vigilant; not secure or careless, but rather suspicious of constant danger from this spiritual enemy, and, under that apprehension, to be watchful and diligent to prevent his designs and save our souls.”

We must be focused on the right aim. Though we must vigilant, alert, our focus is not on the devil, but on the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to run the race focusing, looking, unto Him, and at the same time be sober and vigilant because of the enemy. We are to resist the enemy, steadfast in faith. This may mean that we may have to suffer for a while. It becomes evident from this and also from the passage that we saw from Timothy, that the Christian life does indeed involve suffering, hardship. It does indeed involve a fight and it requires steadfastness. It means that during our Christian walk we will have to suffer at times. Why do I say all these? I’m focusing more on those of us that for some reason are now discouraged in their Christian walk. To those that suffer and to those that it appears that what they expected from God is not what
they seemingly get. You are in the middle of the fight but God is WITH YOU. You are going to get out of it triumphant. As Peter said “if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in this matter” (I Peter 4:16). Also as James said “blessed is the man who endures temptation” (James 1:12). I want to encourage you today to endure the temptation. This does not mean that we are to pretend that nothing has happened! We may have hurt feeling, we may have questions and we may wonder why God allowed all this. We must express our feelings openly to God. We may ask him our questions and tell Him how we feel. We are not supposed to play it untouched and just move ahead, while our hearts are full of hurt and disappointment. Job was a man that lived uprightly and yet suddenly destruction came upon him. His health deteriorated very quickly. His kids died. He lost all his property and his wife was scorning him for keeping his faith. On the top of all this his friends were blaming him for what had happened to him. Who could have imagine a worse combination than this? Job wanted to die and I may wanted this too if I was in his situation. But how did he react? He didn’t play it strong nor he curse God, as his wife encouraged him to do. Instead he cried out to the Lord, opening his heart to Him and at the same time questioning Him. His book is a book full of whys and questions directed to God. You may also have suffered a lot and you may also have a lot of whys. Things that you may have expected may not have happened. Few things are worse than unfulfilled hope. Hope that God will do this and yet He doesn’t. It may be a job that you didn’t get, a spouse that didn’t come, health that was not restored. Hope that was not fulfilled. Whatever it is, it is a trial. Whatever it is you must NOT close your heart. Whatever it is you have to speak it to the Lord. Question Him, cry out to Him, but whatever it takes communicate to Him. In all his sufferings Job did not blaspheme God as his wife told him to do. As he said “though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). In all his awful sufferings and in all his debate with God, Job was faithful. It is one thing to question God in fellowship with Him, as Job did, and another thing to reject Him. Job was full of pain but he actually endured the trial. His wife, whom I don’t know whether she originally had faith or not, was full of pain too but she didn’t endure. She might have had hope in God in the good rosy days but in the days of suffering she went astray… second category of the parable of the sower. But Job said:
only the good things will receive from God. Not also the bad. (Job 2:10). Job was prepared and you must be too. You must be prepared and make a decision that whatever it takes, whatever suffering, whatever unfulfilled hope or whatever else it takes, you will remain faithful till the end. It is not faithfulness to an idea… but faithful to the God that has revealed Himself to you. Make the decision to run the race till the end, whatever it takes, and run it with patience looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith! As Peter says:

“But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

God bless you

Tassos Kioulachoglou