

THE HEAVENLY RACE

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"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." Hebrews 12:1,2

When the peculiar and discriminating doctrines of the Gospel are proclaimed for the first time in a town or village, an immediate and universal outcry is almost invariably raised against them. Whatever divisions of opinion, whatever variety of sect or sentiment, may have before existed, all as with one consent take up arms against doctrines which they consider so novel, so dreadful, and so dangerous. You may plead, but you plead in vain, that they are doctrines according to godliness; that they are written as with a ray of light in the inspired Scriptures; that they were held by all our reformers, and are embodied in the articles, creeds, and confessions which they drew up; that they have been the consolation and support of thousands and tens of thousands of the most godly men who have ever trod this vale of tears; that they have been sealed by the blood of martyrs at the stake; and that God has honored them over and over again both in the life in the death of those who have most adorned their profession by their conduct and conversation. But prejudice is not so easily overcome, nor the carnal mind so easily silenced. Men will still persevere in believing that the doctrines of grace are doctrines of a licentious and dangerous tendency, and even the immoral as well as the moral, as if unanimously fired with holy indignation, will lift up their voices against them almost as if they had issued from the

very portals of hell. But, apart from this real or assumed dread of their dangerous tendency, what chiefly stirs up the enmity of the human heart is their apparent novelty, and the reflection that they seem to cast upon departed friends and relatives. "What?" Say they to the man who introduces these doctrines, "are you the only person who knows what religion is? Where are our fathers gone who knew nothing of these new-fangled doctrines of yours? Were they not loyal citizens, pious Christians, devout communicants, irreproachable husbands, parents, and friends, and have they not, having fulfilled a course of piety, uprightness, and honesty, laid their bones in the churchyard, where we hope to rest by their side?" Say, then, what you may in its favor, plead however strongly you may of its perfect harmony with the word of God, you cannot break through the invincible prejudice that the mind of man has against the doctrine of sovereign, discriminating grace. Thus, strange to say, instead of receiving the Gospel as a message of mercy, men rather view it as bringing tidings of gloom; instead of hailing it as an embassy of peace, they rather view it as a declaration of war; and instead of inhaling it as breathing a spiritual fragrance from heaven, they rather revile it as bearing on its wings noxious blasts from hell.

But this opposition to the doctrine of discriminating grace and to the experience and power of it in the heart, is no novelty; nor are these men singular in their enmity and opposition to it. When the Lord himself and his apostles preached the glorious truths that we now read as embodied in the inspired Scriptures of the New Testament, they had to encounter the same prejudice; they had the same opposition to meet; and they had to overcome the same desperate enmity of the carnal mind arrayed in arms against them.

These thoughts may be a clue to the intention of the apostle

in dwelling at so great a length on the faith of the Old Testament saints in Hebrews 11. He had to meet the same charge as with the charge of preaching new instead of old doctrines, and introducing a religion unknown to their fathers. To meet this accusation, he defines to them the nature of the faith which he preached, and then goes on to show in the most plain and clear manner that it was no novelty; that he was not introducing to them some new kind of religion with which their fathers were unacquainted; but that the faith which he preached and on which he insisted as that whereby the sinner was justified, was the same faith as had full root in the bosom of all the godly men of old, of all the Old Testament saints, of all the ancient martyrs who had sealed the truth of their profession by their blood. He begins with righteous Abel, and naming one by one the most venerated patriarchs such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all those Old Testament worthies of which the world itself was not worthy, he shows that they all without exception professed and evidenced the possession of the same faith which he preached; yet that the gospel unfolded and revealed greater blessings than ever they had enjoyed or experienced"God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." (Heb. 11:40)

Having thus dwelt upon the faith of all the Old Testament saints, he goes on in the words of our text to drop in our ears a word of admonition and exhortation"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses"that is, witnesses to the faith we preach; witnesses to the Gospel which we lay before you"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." In endeavoring, with God's blessing, to open up and explain

those words, I shall

I. First, direct your mind to the race that is spoken of as set before us.

II. Secondly, to the way in which this race is to be run, which is, by "laying aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us," and "with patience."

III. Thirdly, the Object of the race, and the supplies of strength given whereby we are enabled to run it, "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."

IV. Fourthly, the encouragement which is derived, enabling us to run so as to obtain, seeing that we are "compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses."

I. You will observe, with regard to the figures which are used in the Scripture as emblematical of the experience and power of religion in the soul, that exertion is stamped upon them all. For instance, sometimes religion, in its experience and in its attendant conflicts, is compared to a wrestling match. "We wrestle," says the apostle, "not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Eph. 6:12) Now in a wrestling match, each antagonist does his utmost to throw his adversary: he bends every muscle, he plies all his bodily strength, he uses the most undaunted, unwearied exertion to prove himself the conqueror, and carry off the prize of victory. Sometimes the Christian's course is compared to a battle, and he is bidden as a soldier of Jesus Christ, to endure hardness, and "fight the good fight of faith." (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:3) Now in a battle we know that the warrior's garments are often rolled in

blood, that every muscle and nerve is at full stretch, that cruel wounds are given and inflicted, and that nothing is thought of on either side but to gain the victory even at the expense of life. Sometimes, as here, religion in the power of it in the heart and life is compared to running a foot race, which tasks the strength of the runner to the utmost, which requires most intense exertion of every muscle of the body, and demands for a successful issue not merely the swiftest agility of foot, but the greatest vigor of limb and the strongest powers of bodily endurance.

Now if the word of God has used these three figures to set forth what religion is as wrought by a divine power in the soul, and as manifested in the daily experience of it in the heart and in the life, we may be certain that there is a battle to be fought, a race to be run, that will task our energies to the utmost; that religion is not a thing to be lightly taken up and as lightly laid down; that if a man is to be saved, there is something to be wrought in his soul and experienced in his heart that shall at least meet the scriptural idea of a wrestling match, in which he is to prove conqueror; of a battle, in which he is to gain the victory; and of a race, in which he is so to run as to win the prize. Looking at most men, can we say that they are carrying out any or all of these scriptural figures as actual combatants? Are not most but spectators, idle, unconcerned lookers on, if even so much as that? They take no interest whatever in the wrestling match, in the battle, or in the race, as if they were personally concerned, or as if the struggle were to them a matter of life or death. The farm, the business, the profession, the family, if not things worse, for what I have named must be attended to, occupy all their thoughts: religion is with them a secondary matter. "What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewithal shall we be clothed," is uppermost in their mind. As to the poor soul, what matters that? Are its

concerns, its interests, its happiness or misery, its salvation or destruction, worth a moment's thought compared with dress and amusement, with mirth and feasting and jollity? "Eternity: what is that compared with time? Hell, heaven; an eternal state of enduring happiness, or an eternal state of enduring misery: what are all these trifles, compared with a few more sovereigns, a few finer clothes, a few better meals, a few handsomer tables, chairs, and carpets, or a few more enjoyments of the pleasures of sin? Therefore, let these dreams of a future state, these shadows of another world all go. This pleasant world is ours for present use and enjoyment, and we want to think no more about such gloomy themes as eternity and death. Let us pursue the solid realities of time, and let those who will think about eternity." Is not this the spirit and feeling, if not the very language of the atheistic world: the very breathings, if not the exact words, of man's infidel heart? Am I wrong, then, in saying that the great mass of men take no interest whatever in the race not even so much as to become spectators of it, or even admire those who are bending every sinew to win the prize?

But again: there are those who do run, yet never win the prize. As the apostle says "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain." (1 Cor. 9:24) Many run, but few obtain; many seek, but few find; many are called, but few are chosen; many are religious, but few are saved; many have their thoughts exercised more or less with eternal objects, who will prove to come short of winning the glorious crown.

But turning our eyes away from these, let us fix them on the race itself. It is said in the text to be "set before us." If, then, we are to be runners in this race, we must run it as God has laid it down by the Blessed Spirit. And we may briefly say, that he has set it before us in three different ways.

1. First, it is set before us in the unerring word of truth. In all contests of strength or skill certain rules are laid down which must be rigorously observed what are usually called the laws of the game; and if these rules are not observed by him no prize is awarded to the successful party. This is true in grace as in nature, in the heavenly as well as the earthly race. If, then, the rules laid down in the word of truth are broken, a man may run, as he thinks, the heavenly race; but no prize crowns the exertion, for he has not run according to the rules which the sovereign Arbiter of the race has laid down. This may seem hard, but it is not my doctrine but the apostle's "If a man also strive for masteries, yet he is not crowned, except he strive lawfully;" (2 Tim. 2:5) that is, according to the laws laid down of the contest. It is not, then, the mere running which secures the prize, but it is whether you run the race set before you as God would have you run. You may choose your own course; you may mark out your own lists; you may select your own pace; you may fix your own time or your own rules. But even if you come in first, will the Lord award you the prize? No. He says "I have fixed in my own mind a certain race to be run, and I have laid down the rules of it in my inspired word; if then you run, you must run the race just as I have set it before you, or you will not obtain the prize and receive the crown." If, then, a man is not enlightened by divine teaching to see what the race is, as laid down by God himself, he has not yet put his feet into the course. The first requisite, then, to running the race is to see it with an enlightened eye as set before us in the Scriptures of truth. To do this requires divine light. But as we all are dead by nature, we need divine life and power not only to see it, but to run it when seen.

2. But this race is set before us also in the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, when here below, ran a race that God had appointed him for he had a work to perform which his

Father gave him, and which he finished to the uttermost; whereby we can see in the example of that most blessed Lord, if we are to follow in his footsteps, that there is a work to be done also by us, not indeed like his, meritorious and justifying, but an exercise of those Christian graces which shone forth so conspicuously in him. Thus we see in his holy example that there is a faith, a hope, a love, a patience, a submission to God's will, a glorifying him in heart, lip, and life, by the exercise of which we follow in his steps; and we may be assured that only so far as we follow in some measure in the footsteps of Jesus do we run the race set before us.

3. The saints of God, too, who have lived and died before us, have left us the pattern of their faith and obedience for us to follow. We see it in all the Bible saints, whose experience is left upon record, that we might compare the work upon our heart with what we read was wrought upon theirs, and not their experience only of God's goodness and mercy, but their trials, temptations, and sufferings, with their faith and obedience. This made the apostle say "Whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." (Heb. 13:7) And he proposes himself as their pattern "Be ye followers of me even as I am also of Christ Jesus." (1 Cor. 11:1) Thus James also bids us take the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord for an example of suffering affliction and of patience; (James 5:10) and the Church is bidden to go her way forth by the footsteps of the flock. (Songs 1:8) None can run this race but the saints of God, for the ground itself is holy ground, of which we read that "no unclean beast is to be found therein." None but the redeemed walk there; and none have ever won the prize but those who have run this heavenly race as redeemed by precious blood.

Bear in mind, then, that the first thing is to see the course

marked out before our eyes as set before us in the Scriptures of truth, in the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the experience of the saints.

Now no sooner do we see by faith the race set before us than we begin to run; and, like Christian in the "Pilgrim's Progress," we run from the City of Destruction, our steps being winged with fear and apprehension. All this, especially in the outset, implies energy, movement, activity, pressing forward; running as it were for our life; escaping, as Lot, to the mountain; fleeing, as the prophet speaks, "like as ye fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah;" (Zech. 14:5) or as the manslayer fled to the city of refuge from the avenger of blood. As then the runner stretches forward hands, and feet, and head, intent on being first to reach the goal, so in the spiritual race there is a stretching forth of the faculties of the new-born soul to win the heavenly prize. There is a stretching forth of the spiritual understanding to become possessed of clear views of heavenly truth. There is a stretching forth of the desires of the heart to experience the love of God; to feel acceptance with him through the blood of sprinkling; to know the way of salvation for ourselves, and to have clear evidences that our feet are in it; to receive tokens for good, and manifestations of the pardoning love of God; to walk in his fear, live to his praise, and enjoy union and communion with the blessed Lord. And there is a stretching forth of the affections of the heart after Jesus and the truth as it is in Jesus, with many longings, breathings, earnest cries, and fervent wrestlings at the throne of grace, that we may know the truth and by the truth be sanctified and made free. So that when you look at the word "race" as emblematic of a Christian's path, you see that it is not any movement of the body, what the apostle calls "bodily exercise," that is intended, but an inward movement of the soul, or rather of the grace that God has lodged in

your bosom, and to which are communicated spiritual faculties, whereby it moves forward in the ways of God, under the influences of the Blessed Spirit. "I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart." (Ps. 119:32) Then every fervent desire of your soul after the Lord Jesus Christ; every inward movement of faith, and hope, and love toward his blessed name; every sense of your misery and danger as a poor, guilty, lost, condemned sinner, whereby you flee from the wrath to come; every escaping out of the world and out of sin for your very life, with every breathing of your heart into the bosom of God, that he would have mercy upon you and bless you; all these inward acts of the believing heart in its striving after salvation as a felt, enjoyed reality, as the prize of our high calling, are pointed out by the emblem "running the race set before us." The Christian sees and feels that there is a prize to be obtained, which is eternal life; a victory to be gained, which is victory over death and hell; and he sees the certain consequences if this prize is not obtained, this victory not won an eternity of misery. He sees, therefore, let others think and say what they may, he must run if all stand still, he must fight if all are overcome. Thus as the Blessed Spirit works with a divine power upon his heart, he gives as if new wings to his feet and fresh desires to his mind, and from time to time rekindles those apprehensions of the wrath of God, those desires to be right, those fears to be wrong, that dread of hypocrisy and self-deception, that longing after Christ, his blood, and love, whereby he is urged on again and again to run the race set before him. And if sometimes he feel weary in running; if sometimes he be inclined to sit down by the way, to fall out of the course, and to give up heart and hope, fresh energy comes from above, fresh strength is communicated to his soul, and again, in the earnest breathings of his renewed spirit and the desires of his mind, he runs the race set before him. But to do this or any part of

this a man must have the life of God in his soul. To begin to run is of divine grace and power; to keep on, he must have continual supplies communicated out of the fullness of a covenant Head; and to be enabled to persevere to the end so as to win the prize, he must have the strength of Christ continually made perfect in his weakness. But he does win; he is made more than conqueror through him who loved him. Jesus has engaged that he shall not be defeated; for the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong; but the lame take the prey; and not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.

II. But this leads me to show how the race is to be run. There are three things the apostle speaks of as being necessary to run the race aright. The first is, to "lay aside every weight;" the second, to lay aside "the sin which doth so easily beset us;" and the third, to "run with patience."

1. If a man were engaged to run a race, and that not for a temporal crown not for a poor, mercenary reward, but to run for his life; to run as the man ran who had killed his neighbor unawares, and at whose heels the avenger of blood was; surely, he would not load himself with many weights; he would not wear an extra quantity of clothes; he would not put on a thick pair of shoes; or even carry a heavy purse of gold in his pocket. But he would rather strip himself, as far as he could, of all unnecessary clothing; and if, on his starting, he still wore a certain quantity, as he found they incumbered him, and that at every step he became in consequence weaker and weaker, he would throw off garment after garment that he might not be overpowered by their weight. Thus it is in running the spiritual race. Before we make the first start we are already loaded with weights; there is every difficulty and obstacle in the way at the very outset, and these so great that many who seem to desire to run never

overcome them. And this seems to be more especially the case with the child of God. How continually, when the grace of God first touches the sinner's heart, difficulties which seem insurmountable, and which indeed but for divine grace would not only seem but actually be insurmountable, stand before him in the road. The opposition of relations, perhaps a father, who would sooner follow him to his grave than see him what is called a saint; it may be the persecution of the partner of his bosom; the hostility and undisguised contempt of his own children; his situation in life, with all its prospects; his business or occupation, which may be of that peculiar nature that the very profession of godliness will seriously endanger his worldly welfare, and bring himself and his family to poverty: what difficulties of this kind often stare a man in the face when he first begins to have some desire after the things of God! And the higher the station in life the greater the difficulties. The poor have their difficulties, and sometimes their persecutions, in the first outset, but nothing like those who occupy a higher position in the social scale. This made the Lord say that "it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." (Matt. 19:24) But whether rich or poor, every runner has his peculiar weights which he has to lay aside; and unless grace be in his heart, he cannot do so. Many have desired to be what is called "religious" and have made a few feeble, oft-repeated and as oft-defeated, attempts to come out of the world and seek the salvation of their souls, but then have been appalled by the difficulties in the way. They have not had strength or resolution to begin because they found at the very outset, at the very entrance in the race, there were such pressing difficulties to be encountered. They had relations who frowned; their worldly circumstances were imperiled; they had to face the frowns of a world whose frown they feared and whose smile they loved; and thus at the very outset they gave up, because

they could not lay aside every weight. But grace, in a child of God, overcomes these obstacles. It plants in his conscience those deep convictions and it sets before his eyes such a sense of his lost, ruined condition; he is so stung by guilt, pierced by the arrows of the law, condemned by his own conscience, and has such a view of death and judgment and what awaits those who live and die unpardoned, that he breaks through every obstacle; however weighty, however numerous, he bursts through them all. He says "My soul is at stake: what are relations to me, if to serve them I am imperiling my soul? What is father; what is wife; what are children; what are house or land; what is everything or anything of an earthly, perishing nature, if I am to die under the wrath of God?" Therefore, he breaks through them all; and he finds it easy to do so, for at best these difficulties and obstacles are but cobwebs when met by a firm resolution. In fact, they are difficulties only to cowards; obstacles only to those who were but too willing they should be such, who only wanted an excuse not to run. When, then, grace enables a man to break through them, he finds them as Samson found the withes and bands that bound him. Grace in the heart enables a man to set his face against all opposing obstacles: he breaks through them all finding them no barriers to his making the start; and laying aside the weights, he begins the race set before him. Like a runner beginning a race, he is at first all ardor, full of strength and energy, his eye bent upon the crown, his feet unencumbered; and he runs eagerly on. But after a time, he begins to find that he has not yet laid aside every weight; and as his strength begins to fail, the weights he carries make themselves manifest as encumbrances. He has not yet got thoroughly rid of the world. He may have thrown off the world without, but there is the world within of which he cannot so easily divest himself. He has thrown aside outward sins that once pressed him down to earth and were clogs and fetters to his laboring

feet; but he begins to find that his sins within he cannot so easily lay aside; that if enabled by grace to break off commission of sin outwardly, there is still an evil heart that is ever bringing forth fresh occasions and fresh temptations to evil. He finds also that it is only by grace he can lay aside those weights; that everything that is not grace is weight; everything that does not help, hinders; and everything that does not urge forward, keeps back. Thus he finds that he has to lay aside many things which at first he did not feel to be weights; to give up many practices, principles, and dearly cherished idols, for he finds that now, unless he lays them aside, he is so clogged and impeded by them that he is sure he shall never come off conqueror. He begins to find that not only sin of every shape and name that is in the heart, as it rises to view and demands gratification, becomes a weight that clogs his feet, but his own strength, wisdom, and righteousness; his own resolutions, vows, and promises; his own fleshly piety and creature holiness are also encumbering weights which he must lay aside.

How, then, shall he so run as to obtain, when instead of getting stronger he becomes weaker, and instead of gathering fresh courage with every step, feels himself more and more faint and more and more feeble as the race is prolonged? If the Lord, then, were not with him in the race, he must sink; if he who is the strength of his people did not give fresh strength to his feet; if he who teaches the hands to war and the fingers to fight did not make his feet to be as hinds' feet, they would fail him in this race for life or death. But the Lord, by his Spirit and grace, keeps giving him fresh strength and power; sets before him fresh motives to run; urges him forward sometimes by terror, and draws him forward sometimes by love. Thus receiving mercy, he faint not, but holds out and holds on. This in fact is the grand secret of the successful runner. Thus Paul ran. "I therefore so

run; not as uncertainly." What then makes the difference between the runners who fail and the runners who win, but that the one runs in his own strength and the other in the Lord's; that the one runs by works and the other by faith; that the one runs by free will and the other by free grace?

2. But after a time he finds that there is a sin "which doth very easily beset him;" and if enabled to lay aside the various weights which I have named, he cannot with equal facility lay aside this peculiar sin. But what is this besetting sin which the apostle here bids us lay aside? It is not as many interpret the words, that sin to which this or that person is peculiarly addicted, such as pride, covetousness, sensuality. It is perfectly true that we all have our peculiar besetments, but it is not of these that the apostle here speaks; for the sin which all that run are to lay aside besets all runners alike, which would not be the case with each man's peculiar temptation. But the sin which doth so easily beset us all is the sin of unbelief. It is in the original a very expressive word, for it means a garment which hangs loosely about the feet, and, as the runner presses forward, throws him down. We may picture before our eyes a runner thus dressed, and we should soon see that, finding this loose flowing garment continually impeding his movements, and that he is thereby prevented from running actively on, he would throw it aside that he might have full scope to run without its impeding hindrance. But how truly and vividly does this figure represent the nature of unbelief! What spiritual runner does not find, as he runs the race, that unbelief is this besetting sin which more than any other entangles his steps and twines itself round every limb? It is a sin that of all other sins cleaves most closely and most continually impedes every spiritual movement. If you are seeking the Lord with some earnestness in your soul, how suddenly, how quickly unbelief comes in as a chilling blast,

and how almost instantaneously, like the east winds which we are now experiencing, it nips and chills the tender buds of spiritual desire and the opening life of the soul! How even sometimes it casts a black frost over the blossoms of hope in which the early life of the soul had, as a tree in spring, become clothed, and how in consequence they drop off blighted and withered! But where unbelief is not permitted for a time, as in Job's and Jeremiah's case, to blight hope, how, to revert to the metaphor of the text, it hinders and impedes the steps of the heavenly runner! And the reason is, because it is the grand antagonist to that faith whereby alone we are enabled to run at all. This seems evident from the very nature of the race itself. For if faith be the grand influencing motive, enabling us to run, what can hinder the race so much as unbelief, its opposite? How it hindered the children of Israel in running their race to the promised land, so that "they could not enter in because of unbelief." How it hindered Abraham when he denied his wife; Sarah when she put Hagar into a wrong position; Isaac when he secretly preferred Esau to Jacob; Rebekah when she procured by deceit the blessing; Job and Jeremiah when they cursed the day of their birth; David when he numbered the people; Jonah when he fled to Tarshish; and Peter when he denied his Lord and Master. And I may appeal to the experience of every saint of God who is running the race, whether he does not find unbelief to be that sin which causes him the greatest amount of hindrance. Then he must lay it aside, or he cannot run so as to obtain. But you may ask, how does he lay it aside? Can he without special help? No, assuredly not. To say that he could, would be to give strength to the creature; would be to pluck the crown of grace from the Redeemer's brow and put it upon the head of man. The same grace then that first opened his eyes to see the race set before him, that put his feet into the strait and narrow path; the same grace in blessed exercise enables him by an act of faith to "lay

aside the sin which doth so easily beset us." But there is this difference between the heavenly race and the earthly; that in the earthly race, the weight once abandoned is no more felt; the garment laid aside is no more taken up. But not so in the heavenly race. The weights, or at least many of them, return, or new ones come in their place; and if the sin which so easily beset us is laid aside, our heart again gathers it up, for unbelief is deeply seated in our very nature, and is continually springing up out of the depths of our carnal mind. If, therefore, we are enabled one day to lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, on the next the weights may be as heavy as ever, and unbelief may beset us with still greater power and still greater violence. Yet run we must, and run we shall as helped by the grace of God; and every step we put forward is attained only by laying aside the weights and the sin which doth so easily beset us.

3. But there is another qualification necessary, and that is patience, or, as the word means, endurance. This is the grand requisite of the runner naturally, if the foot race be of unusual length. He cannot possibly win the prize unless, besides mere fleetness of limb, he possess great endurance of bodily strength, and, above all, that force and energy of resolution whereby he is determined not to give up, not to give out, but to hold on even to the very last. This tasks all his power; for a race of any length is not won by sheer agility, by lightness of foot, and nimbleness of limb, but by bodily endurance, by strength of lung and power of muscle, and, above all, by high courage and determination not to be beaten. So in running the heavenly race. It must be run with endurance. It is not to be won by stepping nimbly forward at first, and then, scant of breath and worn out with fatigue, to fall flat upon the course or drop out as unable to proceed further. The heavenly race is not like a foot race in the

meadows a ten minutes' spurt but a race for life; a race ever renewing and never ending till the immortal crown is won. It will task, then, every gracious energy, and can only be won by the most patient endurance of every spiritual faculty. We shall soon see this if we look at the hindrances and difficulties which meet the runner at well-nigh every step. Look at our own faintness, if we have run long; at our own doubting, misgiving hearts; our own feeble faith, scanty hope, and wavering love. Everything naturally out of us, everything naturally in us, calls out for ease, rest, and standing still. To be ever watching, ever praying, ever reading and hearing; ever resisting sin and Satan, denying self, and crucifying the flesh; to be ever tempted, tried, and exercised; to be ever under some affliction of mind or body, of family or circumstances; to be plagued all the day long and chastened every morning; how all this daily experience needs patient endurance. Here all fail but the family of God. As then the soul finds more and more of its weakness and helplessness, produced by these painful trials and exercises, it feels more the need of patient endurance that it may hold out to the end; for only those who endure to the end shall be saved. Many run well for a time. Many seem as though by their earnestness and activity, their zeal and ardor, they would snatch the prize by a few onward footsteps as though they would gain the victory by the exertion of a day, or win heaven by the earnestness of an hour. But these are the first to give out; like the children of Ephraim, to turn their back in the day of battle; the first to yield to the foe when sharply pressed. Many run but few obtain. Sin ruins some; error blights others; the world damps this man's zeal, and prosperity wither's that man's ardor, till the course is strewn with the fallen, and a few only struggle on to the end. Grace alone secures the prize; and the reason is because the grace of God in the heart is of an enduring nature, and therefore abides when all else is lost. Natural faith soon dies out;

creature hope gives up the ghost; and fleshly zeal and earnestness are speedily quenched to the last spark. But grace is of an enduring nature, as being from a divine fountain. "The righteous holds on his way," because "grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life." Therefore, those who are possessed of grace will hold out to the end; they will not only run the race, but win the prize. It will be true of them all what Paul said of himself "I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." (2 Tim. 4:7,8)

III. But it is time to pass on to our third point, which is the Object toward which we are to look, and the supplies of grace and strength which enable us to run. Let none of you think there is any strength or power in the creature to run the race, at least with any hope of winning the prize. A dead man might as soon be set to run with a living man as a dead soul to run a race which is wholly spiritual and divine. There must be divine life in a man's soul before he can even commence the race. Therefore, let no one think that I ascribe any power to the creature, or would rob the blessed Redeemer of his crown to give his glory to another. If I did not see it in every page of God's truth, my own experience would give the lie to this. No one can ever run the race set before him, except by looking unto Jesus. He is at the head of the race; he stands at the goal, holding the crown of victory in his hand which he puts upon the head of the successful runner. Here again we see the necessity of a living faith, for we can only run on as we view Jesus by the eye of faith at the right hand of the Father opening his blessed arms to receive us into his own bosom at the end of the race.

But if we look unto Jesus, it must be, as the word implies in the original, by looking off everything else. To run successfully we must not look upon the ground, to see where it is rough and rugged and where it is easy and smooth, that we may pick and choose our way; nor to the right or to the left, to see whether the bystanders condemn or approve, hiss or cheer; nor to our own strength or weakness of limb, and swiftness or slowness of foot; nor to the distance behind or the distance before; nor to our competitors to compare our running with theirs; nor to any object that may distract the eye from looking unto Jesus and to him alone. Here all fail but the heaven-taught child of grace. When we look out from off our watch tower, how we see professors of religion running in all directions. The religious world has its races as well as the profane, and there is no lack of entries, prizes, or competitors. But where among them shall we find those, who looking off every other object, look to Jesus alone? Nor indeed can any one really look to him but by the special gift and grace of God. He must be revealed to the soul by the power of God; we must behold his glorious Godhead and his suffering manhood by the eye of faith; and we must view him as the incarnate God, the only Mediator between God and man. We must see the efficacy of his atoning blood to purge a guilty conscience; the blessedness of his obedience to justify a needy, naked soul; the sweetness of his dying love as an inward balm and cordial against all the thousand ills and sorrows of life. We must see his glory, as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth; his suitability to every want and woe; his infinite compassion to the vilest and worst of sinners; his patient forbearance and wondrous long suffering of our sins and backslidings; his unchanging love, stronger than death itself; his readiness to hear; his willingness to bless; and his ability to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by him. Thus the heavenly runner looks not to the course however long, nor to the ground

however rough, nor to his own exertions however multiplied, nor to his own strength whether much or little; nor to applauding friends nor to condemning foes; but wholly and sorely to the incarnate Son of God. Jesus draws him onward with his invincible grace; and as he runs and looks, and looks and runs, every fresh look gives renewed strength, and every time we view his beauty and glory we see more to believe, to admire, and to love. Every glance of his beauteous Person renews the flame of holy love; every sight of his blood and righteousness kindles desires to experience more of their efficacy and blessedness; and every touch of his sacred finger melts the heart into conformity to his suffering image. This is the life of a Christian, day by day, to be running a race for eternity; and, as speeding onward to a heavenly goal, to manifest his sincerity and earnestness by continually breathing forth the yearnings of his soul after divine realities, and to be pressing forward more and more toward the Lord Jesus Christ as giving him a heavenly crown when he has finished his course with joy. But as he runs, and just in proportion to his earnestness, he is bowed down with weights. Many trials and sorrows, many cares and wearying anxieties, many powerful temptations, many bosom sins, many inward idols, many doubts and fears, many sinkings and tremblings, many hindrances from his felt coldness, darkness, and death, hang upon him and press him down, so that at times he is utterly unable to move a single foot forward. But in spite of hindrances from without and within, every now and then he sees Jesus at the end of the race holding out the crown, and seeing him he is encouraged and enabled once more to run looking unto him, that he may derive strength and virtue out of his fullness.

But Jesus is spoken of in our text as "the Author and the Finisher of our faith." Let us see how this bears upon the experience of the heavenly runner. He looks to him, then, as

the Author of his faith. He feels it was he who gave him the first grain of grace; who communicated the first beam of light, and who raised up the first movement of faith towards his sacred Majesty; for he is the author of the whole. His first desire to run; his power to move his feet forward; the faith that was given as the first dawn of eternal life, were all breathed into his soul by Jesus. He softened his heart to believe and quickened his soul to feel; and thus he feels that the first movement of faith in his soul, enabling him to run, was his divine gift and work.

And as Jesus is the Author, so he is the Finisher of faith; he carries on the work begun, and never leaves it unfulfilled or imperfect, but keeps supplying the spiritual runner with grace out of his own fullness. And thus as he is the Author by the first implantation of faith in the soul, so is he the Finisher by continually breathing upon his own work, watering it with his own dew, reviving it with his own rain, and making it spring up and grow under his own warming beams as the Sun of righteousness. In this life faith can hardly be said to be ever finished. It is rather like the crops which whiten our harvest fields; when ripe they are fit to be garnered. So when faith is finished, heaven is at the door. When all its trials have been accomplished; all its sufferings undergone; all its battles fought, and all its victories won, then faith may be said to be finished. Every member of the mystical body of Christ has his allotted measure of suffering, which is "a filling up of that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh for his body's sake, that is, the Church;" (Col. 1:24) and as this measure is filled up, the faith which sustained them is finished with them. When a dying believer can say, "I have run my race; I have finished my course;" he can add, "Jesus was the Author, and Jesus is the Finisher of my faith." With this life faith ends; it is turned into sight, and is no longer needed when Jesus is seen as he is, without a veil between.

Ever then bear this in mind, that Jesus is and ever must be to the heavenly runner the Author and finisher of faith, the Alpha and Omega, the first and last. Nor can he run the race with any hope of success but as he looks unto Jesus, and derives supplies of strength and power out of his fullness. If he fail here, he fails everywhere; but if he thus run, he is sure to prove a conqueror. Does not he himself say "Without me ye can do nothing?" Though faint, be still then pursuing. Run on and run through every difficulty. The blessed Jesus, who is drawing you on by looks of love, will never let you go, will never cease his gracious work upon your heart; he will maintain the faith and hope once given, will never leave you to fall out of the race, but will certainly bring you off winner and crown you with eternal victory.

IV. The last point we have to notice is, the encouragement given to the runner to run the heavenly race, seeing that he is "compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses." This is an allusion to the spectators of the ancient games, who being gathering together from every part of Greece were so numerous in witnessing a race, that looked at from a distance they were as a mighty cloud of forms and faces. So is there a mighty cloud of witnesses surrounding the runners of the heavenly race. These have already run the race and won the prize. The Old Testament saints; the noble army of martyrs; the thousands and tens of thousands who have run and won, fought and conquered, yet sorrowed and suffered, wept and mourned, sighed and groaned, cried and prayed when here below, but found Jesus to be the Finisher as well as the Author of their faith; all these celestial conquerors testify to the grace of God in having given them strength to run and having crowned them with victory. These witnesses surround Jesus as he sits upon his eternal throne, and they look down, as it were, over the battlements of heaven on the runners below, and cheer them on. It is as though they said

from their celestial seats"Run, brother, run, sister, on; give not up the race. If faint and weary; if ready to sink, still run on; victory is sure. Be not discouraged. Lay aside every weight and the besetting sin of unbelief, and run on with patience. Jesus can, Jesus will give you needful supplies of grace and strength. You shall not be overcome by any foe or overcome by your own weakness. Run on: it is only a little further. Heaven is at the end; immortal glory, eternal life. Run on, then; you are sure to win the prize. We have run; we have won." Thus all things in grace conspire to speed the Christian on; and he looks not only to Jesus, but to the crowd of witnesses of his faithfulness and truth, as numerous as drops of rain in a summer cloud, and he sees that all testify to his free and sufficient grace. And not only all whose faith and patience are recorded in the Scriptures, but all departed believers whom you have personally known and loved; whose happy death you have witnessed; whose last words you remember, and who are embalmed in the warmest, tenderest affections of your heart; these too are witnesses, and every one of them seeks, so to speak, to encourage your soul. They all bear witness to the efficacy of the blood of Christ in cleansing from all sin, for it washed away theirs; to his dying love, as a sweet, cheering cordial in every sorrow and trouble, for such they found it; to his faithfulness to his promises, for they proved it; to his power to save, for they experienced it; and to his presence on a dying bed, for they enjoyed it.

May we not therefore willingly run, seeing we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses, and all bearing testimony for Christ and against our unbelieving hearts, all prompting us forward in spite of the temptations which make us hang back, all encouraging us to lay aside weight, and to run on as they ran before, hoping in the same mercy, trusting to the same grace, looking to the same Jesus, and expecting the

same blissful reward?

Are you one of these spiritual runners? If you are, you feel, it is true, the weights and the besetting sin; yet there are times and seasons when, in spite of them all, you run forward in the desires of your heart and the stretching forth, if I may use the expression, of the very neck of your soul. These desires, these breathings of your heart, are all so many speaking mouths in your bosom, a cloud of witnesses within re-echoing the cheering cry of the witnesses without, encouraging yourselves, encouraging others to run with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus. Nay, God himself from heaven his dwelling place; his dear Son from the throne of his glory; the Blessed Comforter; the holy angels; and glorified spirits of just men made perfect, are witnesses too. And what more shall I say? That the saints on earth, your brothers and sisters in the faith; nay, I may add that your enemies, and the very devils themselves, are all witnesses to a Christian's career, and all are made in the end to acknowledge him victor.