

Christ, The Better Way by Ashley Beer

The great letter of the apostle Paul to the Hebrews must always serve as a stimulant to the reader and is a wonderful source of encouragement for people like us who are living in the latter days of the Gentile age.

Paul's own zeal for living after Christ is evident throughout this letter as indeed it is in all His writings. Reading His Letters sometime makes me feel guilty as His enthusiasm never falters. Despite His personal suffering and persecutions He pressed on towards His goal, nothing else could compare or blur His vision. He even counted but loss that He might win Christ.

The theme of His letter to the Hebrews is the supremacy of Christ, something Paul never lost focus on following his own conversion. His keyword in this epistle concerning Christ is in fact "Better" no less than 12 times in this letter; He speaks of how Christ was better. Better than the angels, He is greater than Moses, He is the mediator of a better covenant and His blood speaks better things than Abel's. Christ is supreme.

In chapter 11. Paul lists a whole gallery of heroes of faith whose experiences have been recorded for our learning and admonition, whose lives are a pattern for us to follow. But in chapter 12 we are told to "look unto Jesus," the word translated "look" means to consider attentively or to fix our gaze upon Him.

The worthies of chapter 11 are like great tiers of spectators in the Roman Amphitheatre and it is now our turn to go into the arena and run the race of our lives. Paul styles them as a great cloud of witnesses who have run their race and fought their fight and now for a brief moment it is our turn to lay aside every weight and to strip off our garments or all this will hinder us and run the race set before us.

Jesus is the centre of our attention now, the author and finisher of our faith. The lives and examples of these Old Testament worthies have their place as we are reminded in chapter 11, but as in all other things Christ is central.

So we look away from them, to Him who is the same yesterday, today and forever. We look to Jesus for guidance because His teaching and example excels all others, for strength because through Him alone we can overcome and endure and for the prize because He awaits us at the end of the course.

We look to him as our example for He has run the race before us and has overcome.

The word translated "race" is the Greek word *agon* which means conflict or fight, as in wrestling, which was a common sport in the Roman times. We may liken it to our Lord when in the garden at Gethsemane being in agony, He prayed the more earnestly as He wrestled with His own self will.

In chapter 12 Paul sees this struggle as a foot race, a marathon which requires the quality of endurance. This is the true meaning of the word "Patience" used in verse 1. He urges all participants to lay aside, meaning to strip ourselves of all encumbrances in order to run this race.

He also uses the allegory of a race in 1st Corinthians 9:23 - 27. "And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker of it with you. Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. Here Paul states that we must have the single mindedness of an Olympic athlete if we wish to gain the price."

Every athlete has a strict training programme, even though it is only to obtain a corruptible crown and we know that this is still true today: How many of us discipline our lives as rigorously as this in things spiritual? Yet we are striving for an immortal victory.

Paul himself did, for he tells us in his letter to the Philippians 3:13 "This one thing I do forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." The word "press" in this instance means to pursue or to suffer.

As we look towards Jesus, we remember that He, more than any other, has been through it all before. For the joy that was set before him, He endured the cross, despising the shame. That is why He is able to be our High Priest because He has been through it all not just for himself, but also for us. He had to agonise to gain the victory as none other, and it is in that He himself has suffered, being tested, that He is able to succour them that are being tested now.

So how are we to make out unless He helps us? We depend upon him utterly; yes most of us have had very little to endure for His sake, and the word of verse 4:13. "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me".

Perhaps Paul is thinking of those in Hebrews 11, who as he states in verse 37 were stoned, were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins being destitute, afflicted, tormented and tortured. We haven't had to endure such persecutions as these.

A marathon is a test of endurance, a long slow test and it is in the long experience of evil that faith is tried and so Paul speaks in verses 7-11 of the need to endure chastening.

This is easy enough to understand in theory, especially when we are not the one undergoing it but not so easy in time of trouble.

If any of us are presently suffering any kind of pressure, for this is the meaning of the New Testament word tribulation then let us avail ourselves of the comfort given from our Saviour. Do not give up, do not give in, we will with His help come through all the better for it, though hard to bear now. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Philippians 4:13.

Jesus has been through much more himself: and even He had to learn the same lesson. For we read in Hebrews 5:7. "Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that he feared though He were a son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered."

Like us He was heard, it may not have seemed like it at the time for He still had to endure the scourging and crucifixion. He was heard, His enemies did not think so, for they taunted Him. He trusted in God that He would deliver Him. Let Him do it then we are heard we may wonder why we have to go through this experience, but afterward when the race is run we will be glad that we never gave up.

And so Paul encourages us to look to him for the prize Hebrew's 12:12, "Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees;" I'm sure we can all relate to this, for there must have been a time in our lives when we have needed to run some where only to feel our physical strength waning. All athletes must experience this feeling.

Paul knew this feeling too but he didn't give up and so he urges us, like the witnesses listed in Hebrews 11, the spectators in the stand to revive our vision, so do not give up now, make straight paths for our feet, be upright don't veer off the track lest that which is lame be turned out of the way. Think of the prize that awaits us, we look to Jesus for the prize. Jesus is there at the end to award as Paul states it, the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus - eternal life - an abundant entrance into the Everlasting Kingdom - an incorruptible crown - so run that ye may obtain.

Yet in the end it is not really won at all, only in the metaphor of a race, for he gives it to us. It is through His grace and mercy, even if we have run our hearts out, we cannot earn it for He has won it for us by His own striving.

It was His agony that won the victors crown, and it was He who ran the race before us, leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps.

It is His strength alone that can sustain us on our marathon and it is he who will share His own triumph with us, if only we endure to the end.

In His last words to Timothy Paul writes concerning his own personal marathon these words, "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."

Soon - very soon we shall see Him as He is, we cannot compare with Him nor even with the apostle Paul, we can only look unto Jesus in hope of His mercy, trusting that He will judge that we also have done our best with the talents we each have been given, that we have run the full distance of the race and not given up and that He will grant us the reward of those who wait with love for Him to appear.

Meanwhile dear friends let us "look unto Jesus" - for in the world we shall have tribulation but be of good cheer for He has overcome the world.