

# Remember the Witness

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Hebrews 12:1

Sermon Series:  
The Race to Run

***“Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward.”***

- Soren Kierkegaard

The following excerpts are actual answers given on history tests and Sunday school quizzes by children in the 5th and 6th grades in Ohio. They were compiled by two teachers over a period of three years.

“Moses led the Hebrew slaves to the Red Sea where they made unleavened bread, which is bread made without any ingredients. Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the ten commandos. He died before he ever reached Canada, but the commandos made it.

“The Greeks were a highly sculptured people, and without them we wouldn’t have history. The Greeks had myths. A myth is a young female moth.

“In the Olympic Games, Greeks ran races, jumped, hurled biscuits and threw the java.

“Beethoven wrote music, even though he was deaf. He was so deaf that he wrote loud music and became the father of rock and roll. He took long walks in the forest even when everyone was calling for him. Beethoven expired in 1827 and later died for this.

“Solomon had 300 wives and 700 porcupines. He was an actual hysterical figure as well as being in the Bible. It sounds like he was sort of busy too.”

History is important. We need something to compare with the present and, since we cannot study

the future, we examine the past. Soren Kierkegaard said, “Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward.”

We who live in the 21st century tend to regard ourselves as the most enlightened and sophisticated people who have ever lived. Science and technology have left us jaded about the value of anything old. We act as if our modern challenges are so unprecedented that the past could not possibly have anything to say to us. Thomas Oden calls this bias against the past “modern chauvinism,” the attitude that newer is better and older is worse. G. K. Chesterton called it “The arrogant oligarchy of those who happen to be walking around.”

I like singing contemporary worship songs. But I’m not at all interested in adopting an altogether contemporary worship format. Some churches are quick to jettison the old. I want to blend the new with the old. I prefer ancient and modern together. I mean, when does contemporary stop being contemporary? A few years from now, our new worship songs will be old!

Perhaps we are too concerned with what the modern era will say about us. Would our spiritual forebears be heartened or discouraged by what they see in the church today? Does the soundness of our faith, the purity of our lives and

## *The Christian life is like a race.*

the consecration of our service measure up to the past? We have something to learn from the past. These Biblical saints can teach us, if we are willing to listen.

The letter of Hebrews is addressed to small Christian churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire. These tiny enclaves of the faithful seem no match for the mighty Roman Empire. These diminutive churches are holding on by their fingernails. How on earth can they hold on?

The author of Hebrews reminds his readers they're not the first ones to run this race of faith. Their spiritual ancestors ran this race before them.

"Therefore since we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

Contestants in the ancient Olympics competed in wrestling, boxing, javelin, long-jump and chariot racing. But the premier event was long-distance running. The race would begin in the stadium, wind its way through the Olympic grounds and finish in the stadium proper.

The Christian life is like a race. The Christian life, like a race, has a start and finish line. The Christian life, like a race, has a course marked out for us as well as its share of challenges and obstacles.

Our writer imagines these runners competing in a stadium full of spectators. The ancient stadium in Olympia could accommodate 40,000 people.

My daughter runs marathons. She actually enjoys running 26.2

consecutive miles. She invited me to run a marathon with her last year, but I declined. Running 26 miles is not my idea of a good time.

I watched my daughter run two marathons. The first was a marathon along the Potomac River. There were plenty of runners at the start of the race, but most of them ran a half marathon. Emily was one of only 400 runners to run the full marathon. There were long stretches in which she was the only runner in sight. It's hard to run when there are no spectators to offer encouragement.

The other marathon she ran where I was a spectator was the Marine Corps Marathon. There were 34,000 registrants to this race last year and 150,000 spectators. The entire race route was lined with cheering spectators.

It makes a huge difference to have people cheering for you. We feed off the energy of a crowd. In the world of sports, it's called "home field advantage."

A cloud of witnesses cheer for us as we run this race of faith. These witnesses are so numerous that they appear to the writer as a dense cloud.

A witness is someone who watches. A witness is also someone who participates. This cloud of witnesses isn't merely spectators who come for the entertainment, they come to cheer for us. They're not arm chair quarterbacks. They've competed and completed the same race we are now running.

Rich "Goose" Gossage spent 22 seasons as a dominating relief pitcher in major league baseball. He was enshrined last Sunday in base-

***“For 86 years I have been Christ’s servant....How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”***

- Polycarp

ball’s Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. He was admitted into this elite company before an estimated 14,000 spectators. Most of the spectators present that day had watched big league baseball games, but few of them had ever played probaseball. Yet there was present that day a select group of 56 former players who are members of Major League Baseball’s Hall of Fame. They weren’t merely spectators; they had participated in the same game at the big league level.

The Greek word for witness (*martus*) is where we derive our English word martyr. Martyrs are the ultimate witnesses. They witness to the point of death.

Early Christians living in the Roman Empire were required to periodically appear before civil magistrates to burn a pinch of incense to the statue of Caesar and acknowledge the emperor to be Lord. Once Roman citizens claimed allegiance to the emperor, they were free to practice any religion they wanted. To refuse to acknowledge Caesar as Lord was to risk torture or execution. Many early Christians refused to bow to Caesar as Lord. They bowed only to Jesus as Lord and were subsequently thrown to the lions or burned at the stake.

The venerable Bishop of Smyrna refused to bow to Caesar as Lord. City officials pleaded with Polycarp to comply with the demands to bow to Caesar. They said, “What harm is there in saying ‘Caesar is Lord’ and burning a little incense...and saving

yourself.” But Polycarp wouldn’t do it. When he was asked on February 23, AD155 to pledge allegiance to Caesar as Lord, he declined, saying, “For 86 years I have been Christ’s servant and He has never let me down. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” He put his life on the line for what he believed. Later that day, he was burned at the stake.

The adverb “therefore” serves to connect everything that follows in chapter 12 with what precedes it in chapter 11. My English teachers drilled into my head every time you see the word “therefore,” ask what it is there for. Therefore refers back to the roll call of the faithful in Hebrews 11, who comprise the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12. Faith appears 26 times within a span of 40 verses. “By faith Abel...by faith Noah...by faith Isaac...by faith Jacob...by faith Joseph...by faith Moses...by faith people passed through the Red Sea...by faith the walls of Jericho came down...by faith Rahab...by faith Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness and put foreign armies to flight”(Hebrews 11:4-34).

This cloud of witnesses testifies to God’s faithfulness. Consider Abraham, who received the promise of procreation even though he was too old (11:11). Abraham believed God “because he considered him faithful who had promised.”

***Who is  
included in  
your cloud of  
witnesses?***

No one in this Biblical Hall of Fame has an impeccable record of faith. The appearance of Samson, Jephthah and Rahab's names on this list is rather astounding. The headliners, for that matter, are not paragons of virtue either. David engages in an infamous affair with Bathsheba and attempts to cover up the deed by having her husband killed. Jacob deceives his father and cons his brother out of his birthright. When God calls Moses to announce to Pharaoh, "Let my people go," Moses pleads with God to find someone else to carry the message. Rahab is a harlot; need I say more?

These are flawed, yet deeply faithful people. That's good news for flawed people like us. Abraham and Sarah are good news for any who feel as if we are waiting for God to fulfill an impossible dream. Moses is good news for any who feel inadequate to meet the demands and tasks God sets before us. David is good news for any of us who doubt whether God really forgives.

Who is included in your cloud of witnesses? Who in your life, past or present, represents your cheering section in this race of faith? Who are the people who have molded you, influenced you, inspired you, challenged and loved you? If they are still living, write or call them to let them know they're part of your cloud of witnesses and members of your hall of fame.

It might be Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Theresa, your mother or father perhaps, an old

coach or piano teacher. Who are your mentors and models in the faith? In the words of the Apostles Creed, we call them "the communion of the saints," the fellowship of people past and present who share Christ with us.

This cloud of witnesses passes the baton and cheer for us. They encourage us, "Don't quit. Keep going. You can do it. I finished, you can too!"

