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# Run the Race

Hebrews 12 v 1-2

## Introduction

We have just finished our kids holiday club, which ran from Monday to Friday. We had a great time, singing songs and playing games, and hearing stories from the Bible. Our theme was team builders, as we thought about how people in the Bible worked together in teams to do God's work. We had four teams, all based on different sorts of sports: the Fabulous Footballers, the Amazing Athletes, the Brilliant Basketballers and the Super Swimmers.

Our passage from the Bible today is also about a sporty person. Paul talks about running a race. Let's read it again:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. [Hebrews 12 v 1-2]*

Now, I like to think that I'm quite a fast runner. In fact when I was in primary school I got a chance to try out for the school running team. We had a trial run to see who was the fastest, and we all lined up for a sprint. When the teacher shouted "Go!" we all pushed off, and I slipped and fell in the mud.

Now, there was a famous Scottish runner over a hundred years ago, called Eric Liddell. He was a really good runner, and he wanted to compete for Britain in the Olympic Games in Paris. In one race he was knocked to the ground right at the start of the race. But he got up and he ran so fast that he caught up with all the other runners and won the race.

So when I slipped, I got up again and I ran as fast as I can. I came last. We can't all be Eric Liddell.

## The Cloud of Witnesses

When Eric got to the Olympic Games, he ran his races in a big stadium, in front of 45,000 people, all cheering for their favourites. It must have been great to have all those people cheering you on, and might have helped the athletes to do better than they otherwise would on their own.

Running events were quite similar back in Bible times. When Paul wrote about running the race, he knew about big competitions that were run in stadiums, and about the crowds that would cheer the athletes on. So when he says we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses he is comparing it to a big crowd in a stadium, cheering us on. Who are all these people? Well, in the chapter before Paul had talked about all the old testament people who had served

God: Abraham and Moses, Joshua, Gideon and Samson, David and Daniel. Many people who went through difficult times for God. And Paul is saying all these old testament saints are watching us now, cheering us on in the race we are running.

That should make a difference as we try to serve God in our lives. It should encourage us, and maybe help us keep on going when the race gets tough.

### **The Race Set Before Us**

But what is this race that Paul talks about? And who gets to run in it?

There were only a few people from each country who got to run in the Olympics, so they needed to find the best runners that we had in the country. Eric had entered competitions and done very well. Lots of people said he was the best runner in Scotland. He entered the trial races for the Olympics, and did very well, so he was chosen to be in the British Olympic team.

But Eric wasn't just a great runner. He was also a Christian. He had put his faith in Jesus as a young lad, and he knew what Paul meant when he said we are running a race. He wasn't talking about a running race, he was talking about the Christian life. Not everyone gets to run this race: only those who are chosen by God, those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and have had their sins forgiven. If you are a believer then you are in this race. And it's a race to do our best for God, to live for him and serve him, just like that great crowd of witnesses who are watching us, and cheering us on.

### **Laying Aside Every Weight**

One of the things we need to think about if we're going to run a race is what we're going to wear. What would be the best sort of clothing to run in? Well, a big heavy jacket wouldn't be very good. It would slow us down. Or big clumpy boots: we'd find it very hard to run in them. We want the lightest and springiest shoes we can find, and the lightest clothes. That way we have a chance to run our fastest. Now sometimes people wear silly costumes for a race, like a gorilla suit, or a suit of armour, but they're just doing it for fun, they're never the ones who win.

Paul says that to run the Christian race, we also need to set aside any heavy weights in our life. He says that sin slows us down. When we disobey God it is like a burden that we carry, and it hinders us in serving God. He tells us to throw off these things. And that's not easy because sin clings closely to us. One of our sins might be that we moan about life. That can slow us down in our service. It's not easy to get rid of, because we like doing it. We know it's wrong but it feels good to complain. Paul says to throw these things off, so we can better run the race.

### **Run With Endurance**

This next bit is bad news for me. I like a short race. My wee legs can go very fast, but only for a very short time. But Paul says we must run with endurance. That means the race is going to be long.

Eric Liddell liked a short race as well. His best distance was the 100 metres, and he was supposed to run that distance in the Olympics. However, he got some bad news. The final of the 100 metres was going to be run on a Sunday. As a Christian, Eric believed that Sunday was the Lord's day, and it would be wrong for him to run on that day, so he pulled out. Instead he asked if he could take part in the 400 metres. That was a much longer race, and Eric wasn't all that good at that distance. But the British team said he could try it, and he ran in the 400 metre race in Paris. He didn't just run, but he won the gold medal, and ran a world record time. God honoured Eric's decision to put him first, and rewarded him.

Paul says that the Christian race is a long one. We will need to keep on going, and there will be times when we might feel like giving up. But we know that we're not running alone. Jesus promised to be with those who follow him, and to give us strength when we need it. And there are lots of other Christians running the race alongside us. It's not a race where we're all trying to beat each other. Instead it's a race where we're all running together. We can even help each other along the way.

### **Looking Unto Jesus**

Eric Liddell had a strange way of running. Most runners tried to keep their bodies low and their heads down, to reduce wind resistance. But Eric liked to run with his head up, looking up to the sky. It was like he was looking up to God as he ran.

Paul tells us to look to Jesus as we run the Christian race. That means all of our Christian life should be directed towards him. He calls Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. That's because he is only reason we are in the race in the first place, and he is also the one who gets us to the finish line. Jesus did all the work when he went to the cross to pay for our sins, and Jesus deserves the reward, to sit at the right hand of God in heaven. Our prize when we finish the race is to be there with him.

### **Choices**

Where are we in the race? Are we in it at all or are we yet to put our trust in Jesus and join in the race? And if you are a Christian, how are you doing at running the race? Have you set aside the sin that slows you down? Are you running with endurance each and every day? Are you looking to Jesus for direction? Do you think about all those old testament saints cheering you on as you strive for God?

Eric Liddell had a choice to make as well. He could have continued in a very successful career as an athlete. He would probably have done very well, and maybe won more medals in future Olympics. But he chose a different path. He went back to China, where his parents were missionaries, and he served God as a missionary there, telling people about the Lord Jesus, until the day that he died.

Eric ran the right race. What about you?