

THE CHALLENGE FOR SPIRITUAL VISION: AN EXEGESIS OF HEBREWS 12:1-3

FREDERIC R. HOWE

Cincinnati, OH

I. INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, Art Farstad wrote an article entitled “Go for the Gold!”¹ In that article he encouraged his readers to strive for excellence in living the Christian life. He explained the meaning of 1 Cor 9:24 and its usage of the term *brabeion*, “prize,” in light of the Greek athletic games. The background for this appeal to “go for the gold” certainly was the imagery of the foot race as a vivid portrayal of progressive sanctification in Christian life. Because this was a favorite theme in the life and ministry of Art Farstad, it seems fitting to pay tribute to him with a study of a remarkable passage in the New Testament, wherein the challenge for the Christian is set forth in terms of the Greek athletic contests. We shall examine Heb 12:1-3, seeking to understand and apply some of the key terms in this passage. Unless otherwise noted, all references are from the New King James Version.

II. THE CONTEXT OF HEBREWS 12:1-3

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews begins chapter 12 with a highly descriptive particle, *toigaroun*. The first part of 12:1 states, “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...” The word “therefore,” *toigaroun*, a triple compound inferential particle, can as well be translated “consequently.” It points the reader back to chapter 11 and the recounting of the faithful deeds of the “hall of faith” individuals. William L. Lane explains the link between chapters 11 and 12:

In 11:39-40 the writer comments upon the recital of past faithfulness, bringing the catalogue of chap. 11 into direct relationship

¹ Art Farstad, “Go for the Gold!” *The Grace Evangelical Society News* (July-August 1994) 1, 4.

with his audience. The “attested witnesses” who died without receiving the ultimate fulfillment of the promise are juxtaposed to “us,” the Christian community for whom God had planned something better. In 12:1 the same two groups are mentioned for a second time: “we” Christians are to demonstrate our faithfulness, knowing that we are surrounded by the host of attested “witnesses” surveyed in 11:4-38...The climactic comment in 11:39-40 provides the basis for the moving appeal addressed to the community in 12:1-13. The conclusive particle at the beginning of 12:1...“consequently,” marks the point of transition...²

The Old Testament believers portrayed throughout chapter 11 are certainly the ones referred to by the phrase “cloud of witnesses.” One is struck by the vividness of the language in this passage, and the author’s choice of descriptive words, some of which occur nowhere else in the New Testament. “Since we are surrounded” translates the words *echontes* (present active participle of *echō*) and *perikeimenon* (present middle participle of *perikeimai*). Literally, the phrase reads, “Having so great a cloud of witnesses lying around us.” Most translations rightly give the first participle a causative sense, and render the complete phrase “since we are surrounded” as NKJV, or “seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses” as in the ASV, 1901. The imagery suggests an athletic event taking place down in an arena, with the tiers of the amphitheater filled with spectators.

One must guard against oversimplifying the picture here, and inferring that these Old Testament heroes of the faith are now lined up in the seats above, witnessing the present race. The key to a balanced understanding of their role is the phrase *nephos marturōn*, “cloud of witnesses.” The word for witness is *martys*. We can easily see the English word *martyr* as reflective of the Greek word meaning “witness.” The importance of this word lies in the fact that they bore witness or testimony to God’s sovereign grace and faithfulness. Think of the term “witness” as meaning “testifier” or “example.” The stress is not on the idea that *they observe us*, but rather that *we look to them and studiously observe them* as exemplary individuals who set the pace for endurance

² William L. Lane, “Hebrews 9–13,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), Vol. 47B, 403-404.

³ Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (San

in faith. As Hugh Montefiore states, “This *great cloud of witnesses* are not merely onlookers of the present contest, but they have given their own witness of faith by their own past lives (cf. xi. 39), some even to the point of death, *martus* here is approaching its later sense of martyr.”³

The central truth stated here, therefore, is that these Old Testament heroes of faith are testifiers (witnesses) to God’s care and providence. Concerning the thought that these are now actually observing us, Homer Kent wisely notes, “Their experience now stands as a testimony to us as to what pleases God... To draw from this the notion that the dead are presently viewing the activities of believers on earth is not supported by other Scripture, and is to press the illustration in 12:1 beyond its necessary limits.”⁴

III. THE CHALLENGES FOR BELIEVERS

Having set the framework and background, the author moves directly into some specific challenges for believers. The close interrelationship of the terms setting forth the author’s urgent exhortation must be noticed. These terms are: “...let us lay aside...let us run with endurance...looking unto Jesus” (12:1-2). As participants in the arena of life’s experiences, Christians are challenged to some crucial actions. First, they are exhorted to lay aside every weight. The word translated “lay aside” is *apothemenoi*, second aorist middle participle from *apothēmi*. Translations give this word a hortatory meaning—“let us lay aside”—rather than the participial sense of simply “having laid aside.” Lane suggests that the reason for translating it in this manner rests in the main verb in the sentence, *trechōmen*, “let us run.”⁵ This present subjunctive, clearly hortatory in nature, can easily be translated, “let us keep on running.”

The flow of the author’s reasoning is best seen by noticing that the main verb, *trechōmen*, as a pivotal term, is preceded by a participle,

Francisco: Harper & Row, 1964), 213.

⁴ Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 257.

⁵ Lane, “Hebrews 9–13,” 398.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised edition (Grand Rapids:

apothemenoi, and followed by a participle, *aphorōntes*. The closely knit structure of this striking appeal can be seen as follows:

let us lay aside every weight and sin	let us run with endurance	looking unto Jesus
<i>apothemenoi</i>	<i>trechōmen</i>	<i>aphorōntes</i>

The author now moves directly into his challenge for Christian discipline. The background is the long distance race, not the sprint. In this athletic contest, runners are to divest themselves of any encumbrance which would hinder them. The word “weight” (*onchos*) appears nowhere else in Scripture. It here signifies anything which will be an impediment or hindrance in running the race. The author seems to make a distinction between “every weight” and “the sin which so easily ensnares us.” F. F. Bruce states:

There are many things which may be perfectly all right in their own way, but which hinder a competitor in the race of faith; they are “weights” which must be laid aside. It may well be that what is a hindrance to one entrant in this spiritual contest is not a hindrance to another; each must learn for himself what in his case is a weight or impediment. But there are other things which are not perfectly all right in their own way but are essentially wrong; there is “sin which so readily ensnares us.” Our author is not referring so much to some specific sin, but to sin itself, as something which will inevitably encumber the runner’s feet and trip him up before he has taken more than a step or two.⁶

Whether the phrase “and the sin which so easily ensnares us” is a further clarification of “every weight,” or an added and different dimension of more serious offenses, is a debatable point. It would seem that the position of Bruce, as noted above, where he differentiates between the two elements of “weight” and “sin,” is more accurate. The word *euperistaton* which describes the sin is variously rendered “entangles,” “does so easily beset,” “clings so closely.” Lane comments,

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 335-36.

⁷Lane, “Hebrews 9–13,” 409.

“The writer warns his audience to guard against sin in any form because it will distract them, causing them to look away when they should be fixing their gaze upon Jesus (12:2).”⁷

The appeal to the readers is that they take the necessary steps of self-discipline to deal with areas of their lives which hinder vital spiritual progress. Indeed, this is a persistent theme in other passages of the New Testament, such as 1 Cor 9:24-27. In that passage, Paul builds upon the imagery of the athletic contest or race and, using himself as an example, urges believers to self-control. It is well to contemplate at this point the vital application of this truth to ourselves, as we all strive to grow in grace, knowledge, wisdom, and self-control. We ask ourselves pointedly, “Where do we find the inward strength and stamina to do this?”

We receive this strength, most assuredly, from God Himself. Philippians 4:13 furnishes a meaningful cross-reference to Heb 12:1-3. Paul there rejoices, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

In determining what things hinder us from vital spiritual progress, our Sovereign God will, as we seek His wisdom, make known to us the areas where we need to make significant changes in behavior patterns or attitudes. These “weights” or “sins,” as our Hebrews passage notes, impede our progress. In the same context where Paul refers to “pressing toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus,” (Phil 3:14) he adds, “as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you” (3:15). William Hendriksen explains this as follows:

If the Philippians will adhere to the rule as laid down, then if with respect to this or that minor point of application their views should be defective, God, through His Spirit, will unveil to their hearts and minds the truth also regarding such a matter.⁸

The next phrase of Heb 12:2 states, “and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” “Let us run” is *trechōmen*, present active subjunctive from *trecho*. The present tense of this main verb in the sentence clearly can be a point of stress—“let us keep on running.” Drawing upon God’s enabling, believers must respond to the challenge for consistency and fortitude in the Christian race. This contest is

⁷William Hendriksen, “Philippians,” *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 177.

⁸Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B.

described as being “set before us” (*prokeimenon*, present middle participle). The nuance of “keeping on” is again couched in the present tense. It is not stretching the language or logic of the passage to note that the prescribed or specific course set before us unfolds continually, and the believer is to keep at the task of running that specific course or pattern of life. Naturally, the figure of speech cannot be pressed beyond limitation, but each Christian “runner” can be seen as following a prescribed course, thus not really competing with others, but striving to excel up to his or her potential in this lifestyle of Christian conquest.

The running is to be done with endurance (*hupomone*). Guthrie explains the term, “The exhortation *let us run with perseverance* is the positive side to the shedding of unnecessary burdens. It is this positive side which carries the emphasis in the Greek. It is an action which requires effort.”⁹

The most significant summons is contained in verse 2: “looking unto Jesus.” The key word is *aphorontes* (present active participle of *aphorao*). The present tense has a distinct durative sense of keeping on looking unto Jesus. The verb means to look away from distraction, to look with concentration steadfastly unto Jesus. His human name is central here, for He is the supreme example for human beings. As true God and true man, He shared human nature, apart from sin, as Heb 4:14 makes abundantly clear. The earnest plea, therefore, is to challenge the believer to gaze with concentration, with attention, unto Jesus Himself.

The Lord Jesus Christ is described significantly in verse 2 as “the author and finisher of *our* faith.” The word *author* translates *archegos*, meaning pioneer or author. This word rises in importance here to the stature of a full Christological description or title. Lane comments, “In the light of the athletic metaphor, it is proper to recognize...the nuance of ‘champion’ demonstrated for the term in its first occurrence in 2:10... Jesus is the...exemplar, the champion of faith.”¹⁰

Thus, *archegos* has crucial importance in its stress upon the example Jesus set in His obedience to the will of God. However, as the NKJV, NASB and ASV translate the term as “author,” there is another strand of meaning that must be observed. As the author, or

Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 249.

¹⁰ Lane, “Hebrews 9–13,” 411.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 337.

even pioneer of the faith, or of faith itself (*tēs pisteōs*), Jesus is seen as the pathfinder, or trailblazer of faith in every era, not just in the present. Bruce captures this nuance as follows, "...he went before them as truly as he has gone before us...Jesus...is perhaps envisaged here as having led all the people to God, from earliest times, along the path of faith, although, since his incarnation and passion, his personal example makes his leadership available to his people in a way that was impossible before."¹¹

The other word used of Christ here is *teleiōtēn*, "finisher, completer or perfecter." The word appears nowhere else in the New Testament. Homer Kent explains this term, "He was not only a perfect exemplar of faith Himself (by His perfect trust in the Father), but brought objective completion to the facts of the Christian faith (on which our subjective faith reposes) by His death, resurrection and exaltation."¹²

The latter part of verse 2 provides the interpreter with an exegetical problem. It states, "...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God." This problem hinges on the meaning of *anti*, the Greek preposition translated as "for" in the phrase "for the joy that was set before Him." One view is that *anti* here maintains the sense of "in exchange for," and the meaning therefore, is that Jesus, in exchange for the glory which He had with the Father in the preincarnate state, accepted the cross and the shame involved in this cruel death. The implication is that He renounced a joy already in His possession in exchange for shame and death by crucifixion.¹³

Another view is that *anti* means "for the sake of" or "because of." In this perspective, the joy is that of accomplishment of the redemptive sacrifice on the cross, within the pathway laid out before Him in the eternal counsel or plan of God. Thus, throughout His suffering, Jesus kept before Himself the prospect of ultimate victory, and this leads to

¹²Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 259.

¹³ Selected sources presenting this view are Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 215; Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), IV: 538-39.

¹⁴ Selected sources presenting this view are F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 339; Donald A. Hagner, "Hebrews," *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 214; Philip Edgcumbe

the completed joy of His triumph after going through the suffering.¹⁴

In his exhaustive treatment of this passage, William L. Lane offers an alternative vantage point. He takes *anti* to mean “instead of” or “in place of” and refers it to the joy that was available to Him at the precise moment of His choice to go on and endure the cross:

Renouncing the joy that could have been his, he endured a cross, disregarding the shame associated with crucifixion. . . . Underscored is the fortitude of faith demonstrated in the choice Jesus made. . . . the joy was within Jesus’ grasp. . . . It has reference to a precise historical circumstance in which Jesus was confronted with a supreme moral choice. He could embrace the joy that was available to him or a humiliating death upon a Roman cross. . . . He deliberately chose to renounce the joy proposed to him in order to share in the contest proposed for us. . . . The “joy that was within his grasp” was that of being delivered from an impending and degrading death.¹⁵

The second of these three views seems preferable. The joy of ultimate accomplishment of victory over death fits the context of the passage. There is a close-knit tie between “the race that is set before us” and “the joy that was set before Him.” The view that interprets this joy as preincarnate felicity and joy that Christ shared with the Father does not do justice to the historical pattern of the entire passage. This eternal joy was not something “set before Him” but something which He willingly “set aside” in His incarnate ministry. Lane’s view, while argued forcefully, is also less viable, in light of the steadfast and unflinching motivation that led the Savior throughout His entire life to His sacrificial death on the cross. The term “joy” does not seem to explain even a possibility of deliverance from Calvary, or an option of accepting some kind of preferred deliverance from the sacrifice foreordained from before the foundation of the world.

The text then continues to trace the Redeemer’s pathway of suffering and ultimate glorification. Hebrews 12:2b declares, “who

Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 523-24; Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 259.

¹⁵ Lane, “Hebrews 9–13,” 413.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

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.” Any discussion of this passage must take serious note of the agony of death by crucifixion, doubtless the most despised form of death in the Roman Empire, reserved for the worst offenders. The author uses the phrase *hupemeinen stauron*, “endured a cross,” which nowhere else in the New Testament speaks of crucifixion. Lane explains its full significance. “The phrase treats the death of Jesus...as an ordeal inflicted through the opposition of sinners (12:3). It places his death under the specific modality of the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity.”¹⁶

The triumph of the victory of Christ over death is highlighted with these significant words, “...has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” The verb translated “has sat down” is *kekathiken*, perfect active indicative of *kathiso*. The stress in the perfect tense is clearly on the fact that this action, the ordeal of Calvary, has been completed fully and exhaustively, and its results now stand, attested by Christ’s seated dignity. In tracing this pathway of suffering leading ultimately to the position of triumph at the right hand of the throne of God, the author takes note of the same pathway (from crucifixion to glorification) that Paul wrote of in Phil 2:5-11.

IV. THE CONTEMPLATION URGED UPON BELIEVERS

Sensing the need for encouraging his readers, the writer concludes this three-verse segment with the words, “For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (12:3). The word translated “consider” is *analogisasthe*, aorist middle imperative from *analogizomai*. This is another word appearing only once in the Greek New Testament. Contained in its breadth of meaning is the idea of calculating, of considering, even to the point of serious reflection. The challenge is for readers to contemplate the unfailing endurance of the Lord as He went through the experience of suffering and death. When they grow weary as runners in the race set before them, they must consider by reflective comparison His overwhelming steadfastness in the face of

¹⁷ The Majority Text reads *eis auton*, which also means, “against Himself.” Ed.

extreme suffering. In other words, the comparison generated by this appeal will cause them to realize that they, even under extreme duress, have not endured anything like He did, therefore they must take heart and persevere.

Hebrews 12:3 also contains a textual problem of interest. In place of the words “against Himself” (*eis heauton*)¹⁷ many key textual sources give the reading “against themselves” (*eis heautous*). Weighing carefully the arguments for each reading, F. F. Bruce cogently concludes in favor of “against Himself” with these well chosen words. He states that the singular reading (*eis heauton*), “yields the only tolerable sense in the context, as is recognized by the RSV and (presumably, though not expressly) by the NEB. Riegenbach does not exaggerate when he describes the plural reading as ‘very strongly attested, but absolutely meaningless’ (*ad loc.*, ZK, 391).”¹⁸

The contemplation of Christ urged upon the readers is an antidote to growing weary and faint-hearted. It is reminiscent of other admonitions in this same epistle, such as 10:35-36, “Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance.”

V. CONCLUSION

We have examined some of the great words in this important passage. We observed the context of Heb 12:1-3, and suggested that it relates closely to the preceding chapter. The conclusion can be reached that Christians, whether first-century readers of the epistle or present-day believers, should look back upon the past examples of faith from the Old Testament. This retrospection can be a source of encouragement. Then, we are urged to look forward as we run the race, living the life of discipleship. The urgency to run with endurance is set before us. We are to do certain things in order to pursue the course. Negatively, we are to lay aside every weight and the sin which does so easily ensnare us; and positively, we are to look unto Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of the faith. The exhortation to “look” unto Jesus is the ground for this anticipatory view of the triumphant Lord of glory who finished His course. We look unto Jesus in contemplation, in “considering” Him

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 333.

¹⁹ Farstad, “Go for the Gold,” 4.

as the conqueror of adversity and suffering, and as the exemplar *par excellence* for spiritual vision.

In the beginning of this discussion, we referred to Art Farstad's article "Go for the Gold." His words can provide a fitting end to this study. Art reflected upon the imagery of running the race, and stated, "Thankfully for us, it is God who 'umpires' or rules on our performance...Unlike the judges in athletic contexts, schools, or even the Olympics, the Lord is omniscient, completely just, and also merciful. He'll award just the right *brabeion* to every Christian 'runner' in the game of life."¹⁹

