

COMBINED SERVICE

The Race

2 Timothy 4:7-8

February 10, 2024

In every sport there are winners and losers. Very rarely will you have a tie and never will you see all the competitors cross the line at the same time. Only one gets the Stefanos crown – the crown of victory.

The Super Bowl is tomorrow. Last September 32 teams started the season – all hoping to be the last team standing in February. Only 2 teams remain but only one will be champion.

That's what the theory of evolution has taught us:

- There's only one winner.
- Survival of the fittest.
- Get them before they get you.
- Whoever gets the most toys wins.
- Its kill or be killed.....

This philosophy of sin is deeply rooted in our world – it is the game we call life.

However.....

- **Romans 12:2** - Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
- **Colossians 3:2** - Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.
- **1 John 2:15** - Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

Why? Because we are citizens of Heaven and in Heaven, they do things differently – Philippians 3:20; Galatians 5:22-25; Matthew 5:44-45; 22:37-40.

How do turn our sights from the things this world hold dear to the things Heaven holds dear? How do we become "Overcomers?"

- **1 John 5:4** - For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

Faith in what?

- **Hebrews 10:19-23** - Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,...²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

We place our faith in the One who IS faithful.

But sometimes we get tired, don't we? Sometimes pulling off the road is more attractive than continuing to run....

- **Hebrews 10:35-39** - So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. ³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.... ³⁸ But my righteous one will live by faith, (quoting Habakkuk 2:4). And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

Don't shrink back!! Hold on!!! Don't give up!! Keep running!!

To make his point, the author of Hebrews presents a great panorama of faith – reviewing the lives of those who kept running.

By faith...

- Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did...
- Enoch lived his life in such a way that he was taken to heaven without dying first...
- Noah built an Ark even though it had never rained before...
- Abraham, when called to go to an unknown country, went, even though he did not know where he was going... and even though he was an old man and his wife, Sarah, was also old and barren, Abraham became a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.... ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country -- a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

In awe we read this chapter – amazed by the lives of faith these people lived.

In Hebrews chapter 12, the scene shifts from a history lesson to a Greco-Roman racetrack. The readers of the letter are no longer spectators, they are participants in the race of faith. They're panting, sweating, stumbling and thirsty – it's a long race and some are even thinking of quitting.

But wait, can you hear it... GO! GO!! GO!! GO!!! Louder and louder and louder until the whole stadium is shaking.

- **Hebrews 12:1-2** - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The Ironman triathlon is a grueling race:

- 2.4 mile ocean swim
- 112 mile bike
- 26.2 mile run

It has been called: "epic" and "the ultimate test of human endurance"

If you want to be an Ironman Triathlete you train... hard. You don't sit around eating Twinkies hoping to learn persistence and endurance. You train everyday – building your endurance. You change the way you eat and sleep. The Ironman is a 24/7 365 commitment – not for winning the race – just for the hope of finishing. Anything that interferes with the goal – goes away.

As with all races there is a winner. There is always going to be one person who finishes 1st, but the unique thing about the Ironman, is that everyone who crosses the finish line hears these words, "YOU ARE AN IRONMAN!" – even if you crawl across the finish line dead last.

This is the mind-set the author is leading his readers toward. The Christian race is a 24/7 365 commitment. Your life will not be transformed by wishful thinking. Your faith will not grow and strengthen unless you run the race God has marked out for you.

- **1 Corinthians 9:24-25** - Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

And when your faith is weak. When you think you can't take one more step or resist one more temptation – think of Jesus:

- **Hebrews 12:3** - Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Christianity is a religion of hope, a hope based on faith in what God has done in the past, what He is doing in the present and what He has promised to do in the future. Christians are pilgrims with eternity in mind. We were never promised an easy road, but the good news is that Christ has not only blazed the trail ahead of us, He also walks with us every step of the way – encouraging and cheering us on.

- **2 Timothy 4:7-8** - I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; ⁸ in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.