

## Playing on Jesus' Team

August 19, 2007

Isaiah 5:1-7

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

Today's reading fall into the category of "hard teachings." Rather than tell us that everything is OK because Jesus loves us, they tell us that a Christian life is one of suffering and conflict. When it comes to these hard teachings, I have started to feel that it is presumptuous for me to try and speak for your experience of the Gospel of Jesus and of life in general. As I preach today on our epistle from Hebrews and from Luke, I merely intend to give some examples drawn from my personal and professional experience.

The author of Hebrews introduces a sports metaphor comparing the Christian life to a race. I will admit that I do not know much of racing, having only participated in a few "fun runs" in downtown Chicago and Milwaukee when I was in my 20's and 30's.

According to Hebrews, the course of the race is set for each of us at our baptism and we run that race throughout our lives. This race may be short or long, but it will contain challenges, right up to the limit of our capabilities. To the limit but not beyond. As Jesus says in "[Luke12:47] From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

This race is definitely not an easy walk or a short sprint. It sounds more like a marathon. It is a long race that will require all of our resources. Moreover, not only is a very long race, it is also a relay race. When it is our time to run, someone hands the baton to us and when we are done with our leg of the race, we hand the baton to the one who comes after us. This race will continue until Christ comes again. From running relays in

school and watching relays in the Olympics on TV, it is clear that the handoff is the toughest part of any relay. It is during the handoff that time is lost, especially if the baton is dropped. We just may not be ready to accept the baton at the start of the race and we may not be ready to give it up at the end.

We run in an arena surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, those who have run the race before us. Among that group of cheering spectators is Jesus Christ our savior and coach. Like all the rest, he has run this race before us. However, unlike all those cheering us on, who like us, only ran a leg of the race, he ran the race all the way to the finish line.

When we think of a long race like a marathon only part of the race is run in this move flat surface of the arena. Most of the race is run out on the streets and the roads, on rough pavement and up and down hills. There may be cheering crowds in the arena, but there may be parts of the race where we see no one whom we know. There may not be any one at all cheering as on.

There may be times when we suddenly realize that we have missed the designated course and we are going into a dangerous neighborhood. We have to admit we are lost and be brave enough to do a quick U-turn. Even when we are not lost, the course may take us through some scary places, including the very valley of the shadow of death.

In addition, since it is a long distance race there is going to be a lot of pain involved. A great deal of pain. There may be times when we “hit the wall” and it seems impossible to go any further. Although we may start the race fresh and full of energy there will be times when we are exhausted and in excruciating pain. There will be times when it seems our “second wind” will never come.

Why is our race is so difficult and why is there so much suffering in it? The world keeps placing obstacles before us to slow us down. Nevertheless, as today's epistle points out, it is the weight that we bring with us; the sin that clings so closely, that really slows us down. If we try to run while carrying that sin with us, we will suffer. However, to free ourselves from that sin requires another kind of suffering.

As Paul says, we share in Christ's sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. In Luke 9 Jesus said to his disciples: "[Luke 9:23]...Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." We should remember that there is only one reason to carry a cross...so someone can be nailed to it and die a lingering and painful death.

The course set before us, to die and to be born again in Christ, is difficult and painful. As Paul says in Galatians, "[Galatians 5:24] Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires." To do this, we may have to give up everything the world and our selfish selves value most.

However, the alternative is to leave the course laid out for us and to spend our lives running down a dead-end street. Giving up our sin is especially difficult when our passions and desires lead us to actions that everyone around us sees as worthy of praise. In fact, we may deceive ourselves into thinking that a love that is driven by passions and desires is the same as the love that comes from Christ.

In my life experience that in my counseling I've found that some of life's most intense suffering is experienced when those who have spent their lives doing the "right

thing.” I have seen many good people dedicate their lives to caring for a spouse, a parent, or a child, only to suffer terribly when the one they care for is taken away from them.

They do not just suffer an ordinary loneliness; they suffer because their life suddenly has no purpose. Bereft of the one they cared for, they have no reason for living because they have no identity apart from the one they cared for. They had put that person into God’s place in their life, and now that person is gone. Though they say they believe in God, they cannot believe that Christ can fill the hole left by their lost love. The result can be depression, suicide, or death from a broken heart.

However, if they survive this crisis and realize how sinful their idolatry has been, they have an opportunity to join Christ’s team and be born again into a new self, one that has an identity that comes from God, not from another person.

In your experience, I am sure you can think of many examples where actions that are universally praised are in fact motivated by sinful desires, desires that are acceptable to the world, but lead us away from the course Christ has set out for us to run. To give up these actions, to crucify and kill those desires, not only may lead us to be condemned by the world as fools, and may divide our household against itself, but also requires us to suffer a great deal until we are ready to offer up those sinful desires as a sacrifice to God. We are made so that we must painfully exhaust our own powers before we can turn to Christ for help. Once we have died to our only reason for living, we are ready to be brought back to life by Christ. As Paul says in Colossians, “[Colossians 2:13] When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it

to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

Christ has not only run the race before us as perfecter and pioneer. He is also running next to us, if we will just look for him with our hearts. He is there to suffer with us and to encourage us, to assure us that through his sacrifice he has made our salvation secure. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Amen.

*Bible quotations are from Today's New International Version (TNIV)  
© Copyright 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society, accessed via  
[www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)*