

'SURROUDED BY A CHEERING CROWD' Hebrews 12:1-2

Memorial Day Weekend, May 25, 2008, TFBC

I. If there was ever a thrill I want for my children, it is a feeling of competing in some great event, giving it all they've got, and hearing the crowd cheering for them. I had this thrill once when I ran in a local track event representing my school. I was not the most qualified, but when I heard that crowd cheering, I was filled with pride and resolve to do my best! *[hit my first homerun in a local derby, and the cheering crowd filled me with resolve to press on to do my best!]*

I believe all of us can do something great and inspiring. When I read this verse in Hebrews, I know the Apostle has known the applause of heaven, and I know he wants that for every single person who ever set his or her heart on following Jesus Christ.

In the book of Sermon Notes of Charles Spurgeon, preacher in another generation to the thousands at The London Tabernacle, I found his compelling division of this scripture. He identified these 3 points: (1) The race, (2) The pace, and (3) The grace. There is plenty of challenge in these words of the text for us, if we develop these for ourselves.

II. Listen as I share these reflections with you.

A.First is The race. The New Testament writer says we have been entered into the race. The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a company of repentant sinners, penitent and forgiven, and we all on our way home to the city or the Kingdom of God.

Christians were first called followers of "The Way." They were seen as a people going somewhere.... We are enroute! We follow one who said, *"I am The Way."* (John 14:6) The church is not a successful club, or we would have many more people clamoring to get in. The church is not a fallout bomb shelter, or again we

would have a host of people steadily keeping up their membership for safety sake. Nor is the church a religious supermarket where we can push a collection cart around bumping into our neighbors, or run in for a quick pick-up if needed, all the while checking out the selections and picking what appeals to our particular tastes.

We are a people of God on the move, on the march. *And how do we run? We run looking for Jesus at every turn, sometimes with excitement, sometimes with desperate need. We look because we are assured He is with us all the way, and we are driven for more of His loving presence and His promised guidance. We look to Him for our example, for assurance, for love, for the power to do what He has called us to do, and for the direction we need to go.*

We are so much like soldiers/an army marching together in step. I think on this particular day, how many times this nation has had to go to war to defend freedom. The stories of The Band of Brothers created an image of the bonds formed among soldiers who were fighting for their country and subsequently for their very lives.

Those were critical days when we Americans shared a mission, all of us together, headed toward a needed victory, a destination, a task of huge sacrifice and costly accomplishment. You have stories like I do of those days, and we have all seen memorials that help us remember.

I recall the War Memorial to Iwo Jima, the largest bronze statue in the world, depicting one of the most famous photos in history-that of six brave soldiers raising the American flag at the top of a rocky hill on the island in Japan during WWII. One story is beautifully told by a high school group visiting the memorial. On their day of visit, they found a solitary figure standing at the

statue in deep reverie. He was a Wisconsin-er as they were, and wanted to tell his story.

He was James Bradley, a son of one of these 6 boys raising the flag. They were all 17-18- and 19. He named each one of the young men in the statue, telling their stories and mentioning such personal things as the picture of the girlfriend found in one's helmet, and the boy who had enlisted in the Marine Corps with his entire all-state football team, and the fun loving mountain hillbilly from Kentucky, and the one who was a native American from Arizona.

Of the 6 boys, 3 had been killed there. Yet of the 3 returning, none could ever speak of it afterward to their families. They refused to be called heroes and avoided the media. The heroes, they said, were those men who did not come back. They were still bound together in a common race to the final finish!

Hebrews portrays us Christians as soldiers bound together. Imagine our church, all 250 of you, spending time together, worshipping, having fun raising families, growing up in the faith together, working out the good organization that keeps you all ministering together. Then one day all 250 landing on the beaches to take a stand for your beliefs, and only 27 of this church family walking away alive.

That is what it was like for these boys at this memorial who survived. They felt bound together, and as one said, "I can feel their cheers everyday as I try to live in such a way as to bring honor to the cause they died for." Overall, 7,000 boys died on Iwo Jima in the worst battle in the history of the Marine Corps. To imagine the applause of their comrades after death must have been a terrific feeling for the survivors.

As we think of this, we remember how God created this vast world as a race for us to run, freely, but also with great service and sacrifice. We Christians are in **the race**, and it will take everything we can muster to finish with honor.

So we look for Jesus. It is said that a Christian is one who bets his or her own life that Jesus Christ is the clue to how this world operates right. *How do we run?* We run looking to Jesus who started this way of life and promised to finish it with all of us sharing with Him in its rewards. He will get us to the finish line with honor, but it will take all we have and all He can give us.

B. Then there is the pace. Our Lord is the pacemaker. He has been through everything we will ever experience and more, yet He would go further than we would ever have believed possible. Truly there is nothing static about being a disciple. How are we doing keeping the pace?

It seems easy for us to become distracted and diverted and fail to keep Christ steadily in sight ahead of us. We have to run with real resolve. Next Sunday as we celebrate the long and fruitful life of this congregation, I will be focusing on **Commitment**, just what it has taken to be a strong church as we are. This is always the most crucial sign of life of every Christian as well as every church.

Without commitment we would not exist. With weak commitment we barely exist, and only a few hold the ropes for everybody else. With no commitment, we start with a bang and end with a fizzle. There is no life in a church without well honed commitments, and for those who have never stopped to evaluate their own level of commitment, there is a serious call awaiting you, to step up to the plate now as this church prepares for its future as never before. **Commitment that counts** is a pace is exhilarating for those who find it, and it is exhausting without it. Without sturdy commitments of daily prayer, far beyond the pop-up cries for

occasional help, there is no pretending to be able to hold the ropes of a strong and healthy church, or any faith in God. There is no manner of being well fed on the bread of life without a long time in the bread line of devotion and prayer.

How are we doing on the pace?

C. To run **the race** and keep **the pace** with Christ requires more than good training, good conditioning and determination. We are to 'press on,' but not in our own strength alone..... *"I am the vine, you are the branches. Without Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).

To run a steady course over the rugged terrain of this blistering fast race today, and to keep on following the pace Jesus set, *we need God's Grace!* We must remember that Jesus went to the cross because He loves us! It is for love that we press on. Only with love we can prevail!

Grace is the unearned love of God, the undeserved mercy and constant kindness. Detached from our source, we are worthless and run down. Knowing we are loved with an eternal love, we are reinforced! The Christ who is with us, behind us, and, paradoxically ahead of us, is mightier than anything standing before us!

Returning to the statue of victory at Iwo Jima, one student saw 13 hands on the flagpole. Mr. Bradley agreed, but assured them it was not a mistake. "The 13th hand," he said, "was the hand of God that day!"

3. In this race God's hand never leaves us, nor do all those who have gone on before, encouraging us to finish with honor! Can you hear the sounds of cheering? It is that crowd of Christians who have gone ahead of us. They are cheering you on! Let's press on!

