

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

In context, this verse immediately follows the roll call of those who are put forth as examples of the faithful in Hebrews 11, and Paul connects back to that list, and the exhortation to faith he makes throughout that chapter with the seemingly innocuous word “wherefore”. The immediate connection is to verse 40 *“God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect”*. This perfection is not to say that those saints who died in belief before the coming of Christ were somehow less saved, but that the entirety of the work of redemption must be completed before any of us are fully redeemed; they need our part in His work to play out to fully complete the work. He is laying out the reason why this great cloud of witnesses surrounds us and why they are so interested in the events surrounding the elect in every age. It’s as if he is saying “because these folks died in faith, not having seen or had Christ in the flesh, they are keenly interested in how the saints behave who do have Christ come in the flesh, and what they do with that precious gift”.

We can break down Hebrews 12:1 into three basic components:

1. We are surrounded, or “compassed about” on every side by a cloud of those faithful witnesses, great spectators of the wars of the Lord joyously watching how His name is glorified in the earth by the faithful of each age;
2. We must actively work at laying aside the burdens or “weights” of this life, which include unbelief and “the sin which doth so easily beset”; and
3. We must patiently run the race that is set before us to its completion, whether that race be one of flat expanses and few obstacles or high mountains with rocky paths and difficult, trying passages.

Let us examine each of these components.

I. The “great cloud of witnesses”

The allusion here is to a massive spectacle, a great roaring crowd come to view a competition where the stakes are nothing less than life and death. Think gladiatorial games where every spectator is on the edge of their seat simultaneously breathless with anticipation over what will happen and shouting in exultant joy at the skill and entertainment of the sport they are watching. In historical context, the Roman Circus Maximus, the predecessor to the Colosseum, could seat somewhere in the neighborhood of 125,000 people. The Colosseum sat somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000, much like modern football stadiums do. If you’ve ever been to a football game, you can appreciate the idea of the noise and atmosphere at an event with that many people.

Unlike those crowds of old, or the modern crowds in stadiums today, these spectators have a vested interest in what is going on in the quarrel of the covenant. They are a part of the body of Christ, His redeemed church, and the trials and tribulations of every group of saints until the end of this earthly dispensation. Notice, they have an interest in as witnesses, not as intercessors, as the heathen Catholic monster would have you believe. This cloud has no impact on the games, as it were. They cannot insert themselves into the playing field or go to the throne of grace on our behalf. They are not “guardian angels” able to manifest themselves at opportune times and affect the outcome of events. This is interest in seeing the thing that was begun before the foundation of time come to its promised conclusion. They know full well how this race will end, as they died in faith having not yet received

the promise; though they know the end, they cannot look away for their affection for God's people won't allow them to look away.

We could talk for a long time about the details of this cloud of witnesses, but I'd like to turn attention to the second and third components today as well. So let us look at

II. The sin that so easily besets

Paul exhorts us to "lay aside every weight". Again, the allusion is to the sporting event, this time focusing on the participants rather than the crowd. In the early Olympic games, and frequently in the games of the Colosseum, competitors ran naked, so that they were totally unencumbered by anything. In modern racing, everything a runner wears is scrutinized with computers and hi-tech analysis to remove as much weight and make them as streamlined as possible. These approaches allow the runners to focus on nothing but their form and the course in front of them. The easiest way not to worry about your shoe coming untied is not to wear one!

We are instructed to lay aside every weight, especially the "sin which doth so easily beset us". Again, alluding to the idea of the runner shedding all unnecessary weight in order to make them fleet of foot. Our sins weigh us down and keep us from running our race at high speed. Imagine if the world's fastest man Usain Bolt had a big rock tied to his back while trying to win a sprint. It wouldn't be possible! So it is for us with our sins.

The Greek translated "so easily beset" can also be translated "skillfully surrounding". Satan uses sins specific to each of us to surround us and place us under siege. He uses these sins specific to each of us to weigh us down with self-accusation and loss of faith.

These easy target weights for Satan can come from several places:

1. Our natural temperament and disposition. Some of us are more prone to pride, some to improper ambitions, others to wrath and an inability to control our spirit, etc. Every human is a unique creature, and has a unique set of weaknesses that allow Satan to attack us and accuse us before God as he did Job.
2. Those sins engaged in freely and worked at prior to putting off our old man and putting on the new. Humans are creatures of habit. Before taking up our cross and actively working to abstain from fleshly lusts, sinful habits are easily created and actively engaged in. In moments of weakness, the newly converted can be easily beset by those sins and behaviors, and even those who have walked this path for years are prone to falling into old habits when the stresses of life weigh us down and our enemies set upon us. At times when our faith is waning, we default back into old, bad sins.
3. Sins to which we are exposed by our lot in life. By this I mean our exposure to those in our workplace, at school, in our dealings in the world. The filth to which we are exposed and the flippant nature with which the non-elect treat sin is a horrible thing. The drunkenness, adultery, fornication and other sins which are considered normal behaviors in this generation represent great temptation and at moments of weakness, easy targets for Satan to beset us with. Those things which are forbidden and unknown are the most easily fallen into. Think about the garden of Eden with all the bountiful things our parents had available to them and were forbidden just the one, and how easily they fell to the temptation of it.
4. Sins that we are exposed to due to flaws or weaknesses in our character. Just as our natural uniqueness as creatures exposes us to weakness in regard to various sins, so do our

upbringing, those to whom we have been exposed over the years, and our own character. These are unique situations to each person, and must be guarded and strengthened against.

These sins which so easily beset us are unique to the individual. They may be displayed in an inability or unwillingness to separate yourself from the world. It may show up as difficulty controlling the spirit, a temper, or churlly countenance. It may be a state of constant discontentment with our lot. Whatever it is, it is there right on the surface and without actively laying it aside, it will be used against us by our adversary.

We can look at Abraham as an example to see how a unique sin can so easily beset us. One of the most remarkably faithful individuals in all of the Bible, called the “Friend of God” (James 2:23), Abraham was not unlike any other human in this sense. We read of two incidents in Abraham's life that were almost identical in behavior at Genesis 12 and Genesis 20.

These are examples of faithless fear on Abraham's part. One of the most faithful men in all of Scripture, to the point he had faith that God would quicken his dead body, his wife's dead womb, and that God would be able to raise Isaac, the child of promise, from the dead if he obeyed the commandment to slay him, could not keep his faith in regard to God's ability to stay the hands of Pharaoh and Abimelech in regard to his wife.

This sin was not one of an in-the-moment failing; he carried this with him from before he left Ur of the Chaldees as we see at Genesis 20:13:

“And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother”.

In all of the great testings Abraham went through, he had yet to face this sin directly and address it within himself, confronting it to cast it off. Even at his advanced age, he had not put off this element of his old man, that creature who came out of the wilderness of Syria and into the promised land. Thus, it recurred, and created these tense interactions with Pharaoh and Abimelech; were it not for the restraining hand of God, these events could have had dire consequences on his family, his beloved wife, and the birth of his promised son! It wasn't until Abimelech called him out on it and forced him to face it did he leave it. Without specific confrontation of our specific sins, and actively working to cast off these weights, they do not just fall off. We must actively lay them aside. In order to do so, we must recognize them, see them for what they are in the light of God's truth, and prayerfully seek God's aid in resisting the sin and removing the dross from us.

The word weight is Strong's reference 3591, *ongkos* and means whatever is prominent, a protuberance, a mass; it can also mean something that is suspended, as by a hook. I believe it to be an obvious thing to one who looks at themselves honestly, and in many cases is obvious to anyone looking at a person with an eye toward helping them carry their burdens or genuinely help recover a person from sin through exhortation. It is the burden that Christian in Pilgrim's Progress carried with him. It is an ever growing tumor on our souls, daily added to by our consciences and recognition of our own sinfulness generally; it is compounded by our unbelief and refusal to rely upon the grace of our Saviour, believing we can cover up and hide our faults so as not to be embarrassed by them, in our pride refusing to “confess your faults one to another” (James 5:16). These weights are those things that we cling to which we do not want to recognize and confront in ourselves as sin but the guilt of them burdens us and weighs us down. When we walk about puffed up in our own pride refusing to humble ourselves and

see our own wretchedness, committing the same sin over and over and over again, we can easily fall to despair, asking “why can't I stop doing this” even as we continue to commit what we know to be a sin.

The answer to the dilemma is to actively put them off. To lift a great weight is a positive action and we must work to be able to lift it. To lift something off of a hook requires even greater strength. In this context, think of it like this. These sins are hanging as weights from a hook about our necks. They are not going to fall off of their own accord. Picture in your mind a giant free weight with a hole in the middle firmly placed on a big hook that is deep enough the weight isn't going to fall off no matter how much jiggling you do while running. The only way it's coming off is if it lifted off the hook. The only way you are going to get strong enough to lift it off the hook is by exercising the muscles required to lift it. That muscle is our faith. We must exercise our faith in Christ Jesus just as those listed for us in Hebrews chapter 11 did, and trust on and rely in our Saviour to aid us in these weighty matters. But if we will not recognize sinful behavior as sin thereby beginning the activity of setting it aside, then there is no faith to be exercised, and therefore no relief from the burden.

We must do this so that we may obtain relief of our burdens, and therefore

III. Run our race patiently.

Back to our competitors in the great spectacle of an Olympiad or Roman Games. Once in the blocks and the gun having sounded for the start of the race, the runners have no choice but to run the course as it is. Once the race is started, it must be finished or there is no chance at obtaining the prize, as Paul says

“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain” (1 Cor. 9:24).

What good does it do the runner to complain about the course, or the heat of the day while engaged in the running of the race? How foolish would it be for someone trying to win a Gold medal in the marathon stopping to complain to a race official that the course has too many hills? Imagine Usain Bolt, while running the 100 meters trying to talk to an official about the quality of the running surface? How foolish would it be to waste that mental and physical energy with those complaints, instead of putting every physical resource you have into winning the race, thereby obtaining the prize? In that context it obviously seems rather foolish.

How much more foolish then is our impatience with the Lord our God when we will not run our race patiently, for are we not in pursuit of a prize greater than any? Should we not then look to the author and finisher of our faith and beg his tender mercies to bestow that patience upon us that He himself displayed in His race? Indeed, we have here the long list of faithful servants as examples to draw from how they endured many things patiently, running their race over many obstacles, in all manner of conditions to completion; we should look to them as examples and just as energetically examine them as they now examine us as a great cloud of witnesses.

Let us seek the aid of our Savior to perfect us and provide us the strength to remove these weights from off us, that we may reach the finish line at full speed, unencumbered with these sins which do so easily beset us.

I hope this has been of service to you. I love you all. Amen.