

Surrounded by a Cloud

Hebrews 12:1-2

INTRODUCTION

One of the most touching moments in the Sydney Olympics, held in September of 2000, was when Eric "The Eel" Moussambani from the nation of Equatorial Guinea on the west coast of the continent of Africa swam in the 100-meter free style qualifying heat.

- Now, get this ... This 22-year-old man had only learned to swim the previous January – nine months before he competed in the Olympics.
- In fact, he had only practiced in a 20-meter pool that had no lane markers, and he had never raced more than 50 meters. And here he was ... on the starting block ... ready to compete in the 100-meter race in the 2000 Olympics! How did that happen?
- Well, the International Olympic Committee has a special program that permits poorer countries to participate even though their athletes don't meet customary standards. And thus it was that Eric "the Eel" Moussambani had been entered in the 100-meter men's freestyle.

By a twist of fate, the other two swimmers in his heat were disqualified because of false starts. That meant that, by the time the race actually happened, Moussambani would be the only swimmer in this qualifying heat.

- In the words of an Associated Press story about his race, Eric Moussambani was described as "charmingly inept."
- He never put his head under the water's surface and his arms and legs flailed wildly as he tried to stay afloat.
- With ten meters left to the wall, Moussambani virtually came to a stop. Some spectators thought he might drown!
- Even though his time was over a minute slower than what qualified for the next level of competition, the capacity crowd at the Olympic Aquatic Center stood to their feet and cheered the swimmer on.
- After what seemed like an eternity, Moussambani reached the wall and hung on for dear life.
- When he had caught his breath and regained his composure, the French-speaking Moussambani said through an interpreter:

I want to send hugs and kisses to the crowd. It was their cheering that kept me going. (Eric Moussambani, 2000)

Did you know that as Christians, you and I have a cheering section. The writer of Hebrews calls it:

...a great cloud of witnesses... (Hebrews 12:1)

This cheering section is composed of all the saints who have gone on to glory. Many of them are described in Hebrews 11, but I don't think that cheering section is limited to only those famous saints – people like Abraham, Joshua and the like. I think people who

have been personally instrumental in my own faith development are there – people like Rev. Dellinger, my first Sunday School teacher Mrs. Craft, Mom and Dad, Aunt Myrna, and Janelle Brown.

In this text the author of Hebrews reminds us that we are a part of something much richer and deeper than we know.

- We are not in this life of faith by ourselves. We don't even run it with only the people who are in this worship service today.
- As children of God and as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, we are a part of a family, part of a heritage of faith that goes back thousands and thousands of years.

This is the third sermon in a five-part series that I have titled "COMMON SINCE." I am building my teaching on how the word "since" is used in the Scriptures. Since is a key word in your study of Scripture. It makes a statement of truth and then concludes that:

In view of this stated fact, these next statements should be the natural consequences.

Today's COMMON SINCE is expressed in Hebrews 12 and it introduces this great cloud of witnesses:

Therefore, **since** we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...
(Hebrews 12:1)

Warren Wiersbe, former pastor of Moody Church in Chicago and one of the hosts of the "Back to the Bible" radio ministry, tells this story:

When I was in junior high school, I had a coach who felt it was his duty to make an athlete out of me. Everybody in my class could have told him he was wasting his time, because I was the worst athlete in the class—perhaps in the school! At his urging, I entered a city-wide school competition, running the low hurdles. I knocked down six hurdles, fractured my left ankle, and immediately abandoned my sports career. (Shortly after, the coach enlisted in the army. I think I may have driven him to it.)

The writer of Hebrews takes on the persona of a coach in this text as he shows us how to apply this COMMON SINCE to our lives.

ADVICE #1: AS YOU RUN, LISTEN TO THE CHEERS OF THE CROWD

Look at verse 1:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1)

That great cloud of witnesses are those people identified in the previous chapter – Hebrews 11, the Faith Hall of Fame.

- Abraham, Moses, Noah and dozens more

After reminding us of their persevering faith, he writes “Therefore ...”

That is one of the most important words in all of Scripture. Linguistically, therefore says:

Because that happened, now this should happen

Because these heroes of the faith persevered, you should now persevere. Keep running!

Picabo Street won a spot on the United States Ski Team when she was only 17 years old. She went on to become the only American skier to ever win the World Cup downhill championship.

In 1996 she tore a crucial ligament in her left knee. At age 30 year-old Street went through extensive rehabilitation in order to compete in the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. Street said this about her Olympic experience:

“The last four years for me have been about that one moment coming into the finish when I hear the Americans roar and see the kids' faces painted red, white and blue. That's what kept me going when I felt like quitting.”

She did not win a medal that year. In fact, she finished 16th in her downhill competition. But the crowd cheered for her just the same. The Americans screamed and cheered because one of their own had finished the race. And you have a crowd cheering for you.

It's a great image, isn't it? The saints of old sitting in the amphitheater cheering as you round the track. They know what it is like to struggle, to have doubts and fears, and they know it requires perseverance to finish.

Listen to their cheers! And keep running!

ADVICE #2: AS YOU RUN, SENSE THE BAGGAGE THAT HINDERS

Look again at verse 1:

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.
(Hebrews 12:1)

Sam Poston and his son Ben have walked the entire Appalachian Trail. Talk to Sam about that experience and he will tell you that you never carry in your backpack anything you don't need. The goal is to pack light.

It was fascinating this week to scroll through pictures of the changes in uniforms for Olympic runners through the years. At the 1904 St. Louis Olympics, a Zulu tribesman named Yamasani ran the marathon wearing a collared shirt, heavy shorts and boots and somehow managed to finish 12th.

- No runner today would dream of following his example!
- Uniforms are high tech, aero dynamic and sleek ... because the more you carry the harder it is to run.

As we run the Christian race, we begin to discover those things that are weighing us down and we learn to get rid of them just like our text advises.

- We find that we don't need that anger anymore, so we learn to forgive.
- We discover a habit that keeps causing us to stumble, so like a pair of boots, we replace it with something better.

Sometimes it is easy. Other times it is a struggle. But running well means running light. And I need to run!

ADVICE #3: AS YOU RUN, WATCH THE FINISH LINE

Look at verse 2:

... fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Hebrews 12:2)

When I first memorized this verse, I learned the words of the King James Version. In that version Jesus is called:

... the author and finisher of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2, KJV)

The finisher. He's the finish line. The end goal. The thing we are striving for.

One day, a man hired an experienced guide to lead him on a hike into the Swiss Alps. After many hours, they came to a high and remote mountain pass. To the man's dismay, he saw the path had almost been washed out. What could he do? To the left was a sheer rock cliff, to his right, a precipice that dropped nearly 1000 feet. Looking down, he felt his head growing faint and his knees beginning to buckle. At that moment his guide shouted, "If you look down, you are a dead man. Keep your eyes on me." The man did as he was instructed and soon passed from danger to safety.

The Psalmist writes:

I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. (Psalm 16:8)

You probably know the story about the time Peter tried to walk on the water. You can read it in Matthew 14. The Scriptures tell us:

Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and (began) to sink... (Matthew 14:29-30)

He didn't start to sink until he took his eyes off Jesus. So when you run. Don't watch your feet. Don't be distracted by what's happening around. Look at Jesus. And keep running.

APPLICATION

The Olympics in Beijing China in 2008 were filled with a lot of pomp and prestige. During the opening ceremony one of the people they honored who really stood out. He is now in his seventies, but China brought him to Beijing as an honored guest. Why? The odd thing is that John Steven Akwhari is not famous for being a champion. In fact, he was the last place finisher of the 1968 Olympic Marathon in Mexico.

Why would China who put all of their focus on winning as many gold medals as possible focus on a 70-year-old last place finisher? Because John Akwhari understood why he was in the Olympics like no one else. He represented Tanzania in the Marathon that year. Early on in the journey, John stumbled, fell and injured his knee and ankle. He was immediately out of medal contention.

By 7 p.m. an Ethiopian runner won the race. John stumbled into the stadium with a bloody leg and injured ankle over an hour later, which is a lifetime in an Olympic competition. Yet, thousands of fans remained in the stadium awaiting his arrival. And as he limped and hobbled, the people stood and cheered him on. Even though he was not a medal contender, he was a true competitor.

Reporters could not understand why he continued to run despite his injuries and the plain and simple fact that he was out of the race early on. He said:

"My country did not send me 7,000 miles to begin a race; they sent me to finish the race." (John Steven Akwhari, Olympic marathoner)

We run in order to finish, and we will finish well if we hear the cheers of the great crowd of witnesses, learn to get rid of everything that causes to stumble and keep our eyes on Jesus, the finisher of our faith.

Amen.