

Bernard Bell



As we seek to live faithfully before God we are not alone. We are incorporated into Christ, empowered by God's Spirit, surrounded by a great cloud of faithful pilgrims from the past, and in the company of many other brothers and sisters. Such a life is likened to a race in a stadium. Jesus has finished first. Our goal is not to outcompete others, but to simply finish faithfully and to help others finish. We look to Jesus, who is our model, as well as being the Originator and Completer of our allegiance.

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 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the

pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Discussion Questions

1. Preparation

- What is one thing you hoped to talk about today/tonight?
- What question(s) did you come away with from the sermon?
- What is the best thing you heard on Sunday?

2. Sunday Questions:

1. Subversive Victory vs. Worldly Power

"The Lamb conquered by being slain... The Agnus Dei symbol is subversive. It is countercultural. Especially in a world that values power, success, growth, victory."

- **Context:** The sermon contrasts historical uses of militaristic Christian imagery (such as Constantine's vision or Crusader symbolism) with the early Church's non-violent stance and the "Agnus Dei" (Lamb of God) who conquers through sacrificial love rather than force.
- **Discussion Question:** In what ways are Christians today tempted to use worldly tools of power or cultural control to "win" battles? How can we practically embody the countercultural witness of the Lamb—conquering through non-violence, sacrifice, and faithfulness—in our personal and public lives?

2. Redefining the Metrics of Spiritual "Success"

"It is easy in an activist, productivity- and results-oriented Western Christianity to think that running the race well means accomplishing great things... But this race isn't judged by today's metrics. There is a single metric and it is very simple: it is faithfulness."

- **Context:** The sermon highlights the contrast between Western cultural standards—which prioritize size, productivity, and tangible achievement—and God's standard, which focuses solely on long-term endurance and faithfulness.

- **Discussion Question:** Where do you notice productivity- or results-driven mindsets sneaking into your personal faith or church community? How would your daily routine or spiritual priorities shift if you measured your life entirely by "persevering faithfulness" rather than visible results?

3. Disencumbering the Self: Rooting Out "Unpersuadedness"

"I think it best to understand 'everything that hinders' as being especially 'the sin that so easily entangles'... In the context of this book of Hebrews the primary sin is two fold: unbelief and disobedience... the root idea behind the Greek word for disobedience is unpersuadedness."

- **Context:** Drawing on the metaphor of ancient athletes stripping down naked to compete without encumbrance, the sermon explains that our primary entanglements stem from a lack of trust or being unpersuaded by God's word.
- **Discussion Question:** What are the modern "weights" or subtle forms of "unpersuadedness" (doubts, anxieties, worldly cares) that most easily trip you up in your faith journey? What does it practically look like to "strip off" those hindrances in day-to-day life?

4. Honor, Shame, and Unshakable Identity

"In the eyes of the onlookers, both Jews and Romans, he was shamed. But in his core being he could not be shamed... A person honored in a higher level cannot be shamed in a lower level."

- **Context:** The preacher notes that Jesus "endured the cross, scorning its shame" because his identity and honor were completely secure in his Father's approval rather than human opinion.
- **Discussion Question:** How does the fear of social shame, rejection, or failure impact your willingness to live out your faith boldly? How can anchoring our identity in God's higher honor protect us when we face public disapproval or opposition?

5. Running a Shared, Non-Competitive Race

"And we are not competing with each other. Instead we are helping each other along... We run the race together, helping one another along, encouraging one another to remain faithful."

- **Context:** Rather than viewing the Christian life as a solitary sprint or a competition against fellow believers, the sermon portrays the Church as a community running the same course together under the encouragement of the "cloud of witnesses".
- **Discussion Question:** Why is it so easy to treat the spiritual journey as an individual enterprise or a competitive comparison? What concrete practices can our community adopt to better support, carry, and encourage fellow "runners" who are growing weary or losing heart?