

CWRmagazine

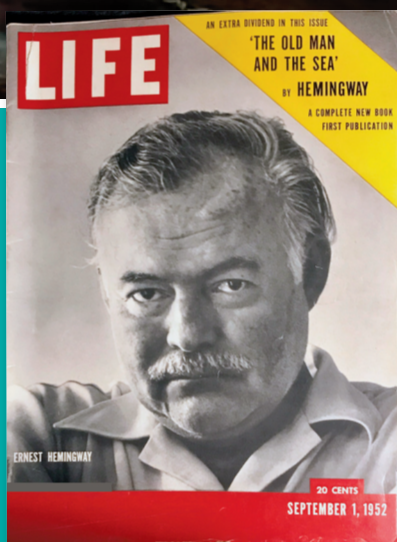
August 2020
Volume 11, Number 4

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



DESTROYED BUT NOT DEFEATED

BY GREG ALBRECHT



He was an old man who fished alone. With these words, Ernest Hemingway begins *The Old Man and the Sea*—a literary masterpiece describing the story of a man who gave his best in spite of overwhelming odds.

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BY GREG ALBRECHT

DESTROYED BUT NOT DEFEATED

(cont'd from cover)

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* first appeared in *Life* magazine back in 1952—that issue sold more than five million copies in 48 hours. The impact of *The Old Man and the Sea* was immediate and electric.

Hemingway received hundreds of letters of praise every day. People kissed him when they saw and recognized him as the author. The person who translated *The Old Man and the Sea* into Italian could hardly do so for the tears running down his face, clouding his vision. People everywhere, then and now, identify with the old man who “fished alone.”

The spiritual connection of the old man's quest to the mission of Jesus are many and they are filled with significance for all who follow Jesus Christ. Consider the Christ-centered teaching of Hebrews 12:1-3:

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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our 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.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

THOUGHTS ON HEBREWS 12:1-3

Hebrews uses the metaphor of running rather than fishing, as did Hemingway. Indeed, we as Christ-followers are like runners in a race.

We are surrounded by a *great cloud of witnesses*. These witnesses are those who have already run the race we are now running. They may be alive or they may be dead—but they are veterans—they are, in and through Christ, champion runners.

The witnesses are not just watching this race as spectators. They are not like fans at a sporting



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contest whose main goal is to be entertained. These witnesses are connected to us, so we might better think of the race we are running as a relay. The witnesses have run their leg of the race, and they have now handed the baton to us. They are cheering us on as we run.

Hebrews encourages us to throw off *everything that hinders* and *the sin that so easily entangles*. In the first century culture in which Hebrews was written, readers knew that Greek athletes literally threw off everything—they ran naked. There are two kinds of burdens that might slow us down as we run this race:

a. “everything that hinders.”

Things that hinder us—that slow us down or impede our progress—may not be wrong or immoral, but they still hinder us. One runner might be encumbered with a burden that may not hinder another runner at all.

b. “sin that entangles.”

Hebrews does not speak of sins in the plural, as individual actions or behaviors, but it speaks of sin in general. Sin is an affliction that burdens us and shackles us, obstructing our mission in following Christ. It is not difficult to become hobbled and hogtied with sin.

We are also encouraged to run with *perseverance*. Hebrews does not see the race of a disciple as a sprint but rather as a long-distance run requiring endurance.

The race we run is *marked out for us*. We don't

choose all of the twists and turns of the obstacle-course-like race we run—it is *marked out for us*.

The focus of our race is Jesus. He is the finish line. Thus, we run while *fixing our eyes on Jesus*. The Christian race is Christ alone. As we run this race we should not allow our attention to be diverted or divided—our race is Christ alone.

Jesus is *the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*. Jesus laid out the course of this race and he also ran it, to perfection. He is our model—he is our coach—he is our goal—he is our source of strength and encouragement.

After Jesus ran this race, he *sat down*. The language here suggests he won a permanent and everlasting victory so that his race need never be run again.

His race was once and it was for all.

Finally, we are instructed to *consider him who endured such opposition, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame*. Jesus flawlessly ran the race we run, and although his race involved the pain and shame of the cross, he endured it because of the ultimate joy he would

have bringing rescue, redemption, restoration and new life to the world.

SANTIAGO—THE OLD MAN WHO FISHED ALONE

The story of Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* is set in pre-Communist Cuba, where Santiago lived alone, in an old shack.

Santiago's wife has passed away. His neck is wrinkled and his face is lined, weathered by the sun. His hands are scarred, a fisherman's hands, marked by the injuries of many a fishing battle. Santiago is a



humble man, who never complains, though the shack he lives in has no running water.

Santiago has gone 84 days without catching a fish. But he *perseveres*. On the 85th day, Santiago once again sets off in his boat. He finally hooks into a gigantic marlin. Santiago battles with this fish for three days. Santiago finally subdues the great fish. He is exhausted. He ties this great fish to the side of his boat and heads for home. His great prize, the huge fish, is actually bigger than his boat.

As he tries to get his great catch home sharks begin to attack, and although Santiago fights them off many times, their tireless attacks eventually leave only the carcass of that great fish attached to his boat.

In many respects, Santiago is just like you and me, people whom God has invited to run the race. Some of those who ran the race before us were young and others were very old, but they were all vulnerable. All who run this race now are weak and fragile in some way—we are not immune from wounds—in need of Help and Healing.

The *great cloud of witnesses* who cheer on those who run the race today have run the same race themselves. Those who run, surrounded by *a great cloud of witnesses*, run in spite of the world and culture in which they live—a world that urges them to define and understand success in life in terms of how strong, how rich and how influential they are.

FIVE WAYS SANTIAGO SYMBOLIZES JESUS

We hear clear echoes of the victory Jesus Christ won over death at his resurrection when Santiago

finally subdues the great fish “on the third day.”

When Santiago sets out to catch this great fish, he has not allowed himself to be weighted down with all kinds of special equipment. He has a simple boat and fishing line. He has *thrown off everything that hinders and sin that so easily entangles*.

While the old man Santiago is fighting to bring the fish in, the fishing line actually slices through his hands, so that the wounds in his hands suggest

the wounds of the hands of Jesus on his cross.

Santiago is Christlike as he *runs with perseverance the race marked out* for him because of the joy of the finish line.

Hemingway describes the painful noise as Santiago cries out in agony—“a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hand and into the wood.”

He leaves no doubt that the pain in Santiago’s shredded hands was symbolic of what Jesus felt when he was nailed to the cross.

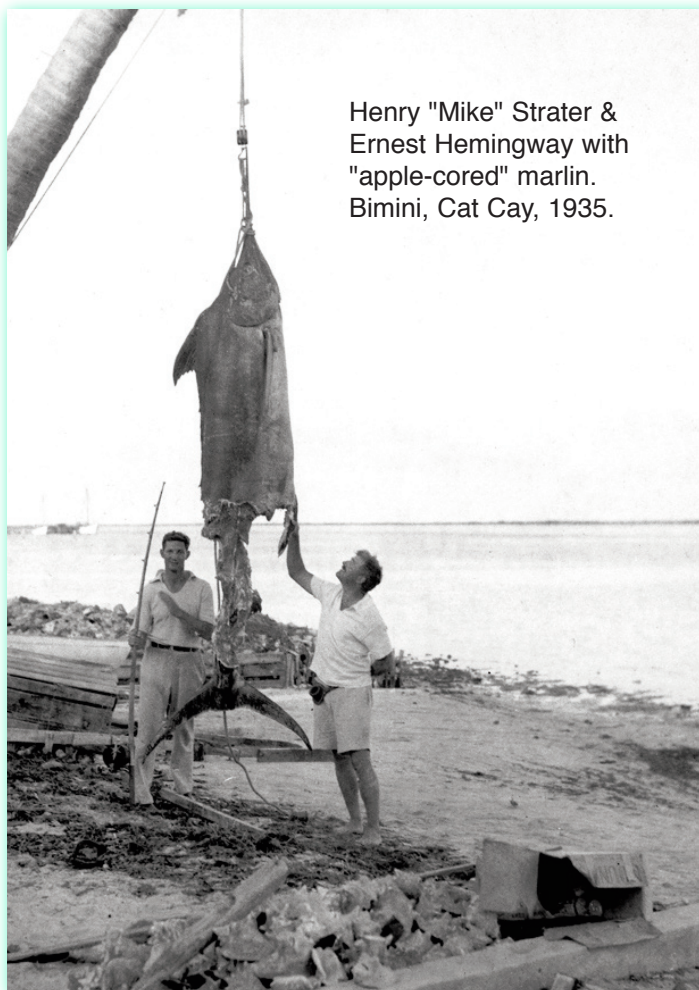
After Santiago finally returns to shore with what was left of his great catch, Hemingway says he “picked up the mast and put it on his shoulder and started up

the road ... He [sat] down five times before he reached his shack.” As we read these words, we imagine Jesus shouldering his cross on the way up the hill to his execution.

“But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.”

—Ernest Hemingway

When Santiago finally reaches his shack, he falls face down on the newspapers that cover his mattress and adopts a posture resembling Jesus on his cross. Santiago lays on his bed with his arms



Henry "Mike" Strater & Ernest Hemingway with "apple-cored" marlin. Bimini, Cat Cay, 1935.

stretched out straight from his torso, his hands still bleeding and his palms face up.

DESTROYED BUT NOT DEFEATED

One of the critically important statements Hemingway attributes to his fictional old fisherman comes toward the end of Santiago's titanic three-day struggle with the great fish. As the ordeal comes to a close, Santiago says, "man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated."

Destroyed but not Defeated rings true of Jesus, *the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*.

After Jesus ran this race, he sat down... His race was once and it was for all.

Destroyed but not Defeated describes the *Jesus Way*—the way of life of all those who run the Christian race.

For Christ-followers, *Destroyed but not Defeated* means *fixing our eyes on Jesus*, running with *perseverance* and it means running *the race marked out for us*.

Victory over all obstacles and opposition is not what defines us as we run our race—rather, as our risen Lord lives in us and empowers us, *the race marked out for us* defines us—even when we know that our own physical death is inevitable. *The race marked out for us* defines us as a faithful Christ-follower.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the old fisherman, Santiago, resembles Jesus Christ and all who follow him in that he transforms loss into triumph,

and while facing the inevitable reality of death, transcends and overcomes it. In a similar way, each of us who run the race face suffering and pain, trials and challenges—and in the end, in and through our risen Lord, we are empowered to transform loss into triumph.

As Christ-followers, we run *the race marked out for us* and are united with all our fellow runners in Jesus, *a great cloud of witnesses*, both dead in Christ and alive.

Not everyone who "fishes alone" lives in Cuba and not all who fish

do so on the ocean. So too, as we run *the race marked out for us*, we need not all pray the same memorized prayers someone else wrote, we need not sing the same hymns or participate in the same traditions, rituals or ceremonies.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus means we run our own individual race, united in our common goal in Christ.

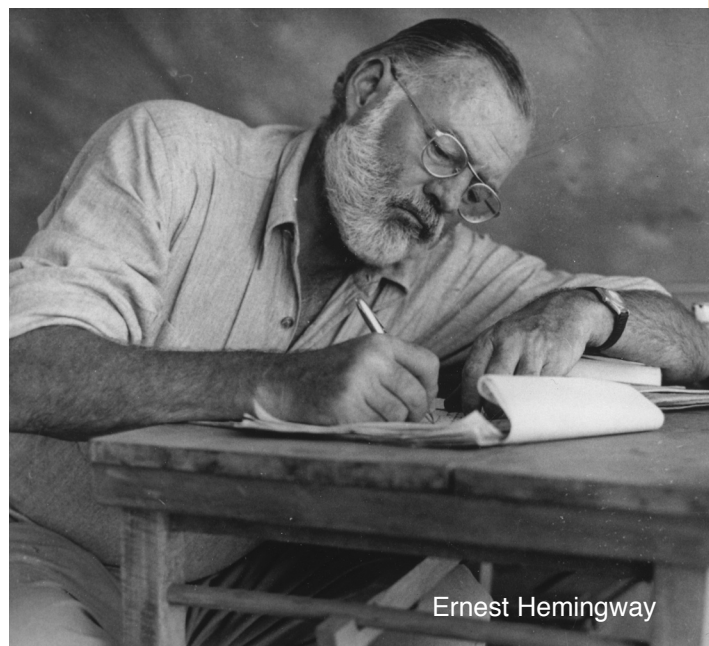
We are not united because we wear the same uniform or have precisely the same doctrinal answers. As we run our race, our unity in Christ is not a set of humanly produced theological propositions.

That said, I believe some theological propositions are more Christ-centered than

others, but I resist with all my heart that our unity in Christ is determined by theological tests, doctrines and dogma.

Jesus has marked out our race, but not to ensure we will suffer. As we run our race, we will suffer because that's simply the nature of running a long-distance race.

As long-distance Christian runners, the suffering we experience is the inevitable consequence of living in a temporal body that is wasting away. In Christ, we learn, grow and mature from our sufferings.



Our suffering doesn't come because our faith is weak but paradoxically, our faith is often strengthened by our journey through suffering.

In the words of Santiago, from Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*: "**man is not made for defeat. Man can be destroyed but not defeated.**" □

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