

# All-Star

Dr. Bruce Hedgepeth

*Hebrews 12:1-4*

July 7, 2013

## Stars from the Past

It's almost that time of year. Since we've been looking at "The Gospel According to Baseball" these past several weeks, you probably know what I'm talking about. In just a little over a week, it will be time for the 84<sup>th</sup> mid-summer classic at Citi Field in New York. That's right – star players past, present, and future will gather from around the country for Major League Baseball's All-Star Game and accompanying festivities like the Home Run Derby, the Futures Game, and the Legends Game.

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you may remember that I am a Chicago Cubs fan. However, that doesn't mean that when I was growing up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago that the only team I followed was the Cubs. No, I studied all the teams. I collected baseball cards and learned about the players. For many of them, especially the top hitters and pitchers, I memorized their stats from the previous season: batting average, home runs, RBIs, won-lost record, ERA... You get the idea. I was a big fan.

So when July rolled around and it was time for the All-Star Game, I knew a lot about the top players. In fact, when some of my buddies from the neighborhood would gather in the front yard for a game of wiffleball, we knew the teams and the lineups and the players well enough that we would imitate their batting stance or their pitching motion. Those were the days of the "Big Red Machine" in Cincinnati and when we would imitate their diminutive second baseman, Joe Morgan, we knew he had an unusual "tic" with his left elbow. Those were days when the Pittsburgh Pirates' fielded strong teams and we knew that their slugging first baseman, Willie Stargell, did this unique windmill thing with his bat as he prepared to hit. We knew Juan Marichal of the San Francisco Giants had a huge leg kick on his pitching delivery, and Luis Tiant from the Red Sox turned his back completely to the plate in his pitching motion.

All those guys were All-Stars when I was a big baseball fan as a kid. But do you know that when I think back on it, they weren't the people who made the biggest impact on my life. No, when I reflect on my childhood and call to mind the people who made the most difference for me, I think of a godly set of parents who lived out their Christian faith every day of the week and who were active in a church family where we could learn about Jesus. I think about a Sunday school teacher I had in that church – Ron Dickson was his name. He may not have realized it, but his faithfulness in being there every week to teach a group of rowdy boys the stories of scripture made a big impression on me. I think of the pastor of our little church, Ben Walker, who came to talk with me as I felt the desire to commit my life to Christ. I think of friends my own age in the church who shared in that childhood journey of spiritual discovery.

Those are some of the people who made a real difference for me. They were the real All-Stars in my life when it came to learning what it means to have a relationship with God. Those are the kind of All-Stars the writer of Hebrews was referring to in the first few verses we read this morning. The words of

the text may be familiar to you: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...”

You can tell by the “therefore” in first word of chapter 12 that the writer is referring to something that came earlier. We don’t have to look far to find what he was referring to – it’s known as the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11. He talks about some of the great saints in scripture who set for us an example of what it’s like to live a life of faith. He talks about Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, and more. They are the “cloud of witnesses” that the writer of Hebrews wanted his readers to know they were surrounded by. They are spiritual All-Stars whose witness shows us how to walk with the Lord.

I’m pretty sure that, if you spend some time thinking about it, there were probably a few All-Stars of the faith who have had a significant impact on your spiritual journey. You see, the way that God most often draws us into a relationship with himself is through a relationship with others who are following the Lord. Those godly people who helped introduce you to Jesus are in your cloud of witnesses. And I encourage you, if it is at all possible, to express your gratitude in whatever way you can for those through whom God has worked to draw you into a relationship with him. They are your All-Star team in the faith. Thank the Lord for them.

### **Being a Star Today**

When we stop to consider the “great cloud of witnesses” that God has used to introduce us to Jesus, it’s not long before we realize that there is an important spiritual corollary to the truth that we’ve got an All-Star team in the faith. Listen again to what the writer of Hebrews says after the “therefore” at the beginning of chapter 12: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”

Because God has been so good that he surrounded us with spiritual All-Stars who mentored us in the faith, we have the opportunity to be like them as we follow Jesus with commitment and perseverance to influence others for Christ. As we lay aside whatever it is that would keep us from whole-heartedly committing to the Lord, as we rely more and more on the power of the Holy Spirit to resist sin, God can use us as a witness in pointing others to Jesus.

That’s the corollary to the text that I don’t want us to miss. You can be a spiritual All-Star. I can be a spiritual All-Star. How? The passage lays it out for us. It’s not about going on a spiritual hitting streak for a week or two. All-Stars sustain commitment and excellence over an entire season – even season after season. That’s what the text means when it talks about running the race of life and faith with perseverance and keeping our eyes on Jesus who is pioneer and perfecter of our faith. It is about living a life that is steadily, daily seeking to know the Lord more fully and to serve him more effectively. It is about paying attention to the people that God puts in our lives – the people with whom we have natural, relational influence. They are family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and others. They are not every person with whom we come into contact, but we don’t always know how the Lord wants to work through us. We can’t always recognize when we’re becoming a spiritual All-Star for someone else.

That's been my experience, at least. Back when I was an IT manager in the cellular telephone business, it was a time when I was growing in my faith: involved in our church, active in a small group, participating in mission, and I felt led to start a lunchtime Bible study at work. It wasn't a big deal – only a handful of my co-workers showed up. But one person who came consistently was a young woman who was just getting started in business. She was bright and personable, but just figuring out how to make her way as a young adult. It wasn't until I left my position to attend seminary that she wrote me a note that having that Bible study each week at work had been important in her faith journey. Even though I didn't realize it at the time, God gave me the privilege of being in her "cloud of witnesses." How can you be a spiritual All-Star?