

“The Greatest Race”
Hebrews 12:1-17
October 3, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

The first half of Hebrews 12 is an extended metaphor comparing the Christian life to a race. The background to this passage is still the suffering being endured by the original readers of this book. They were feeling weak and discouraged as a result of this suffering, and some were on the road leading to apostasy. The race metaphor helps people accept as normal the presence of suffering. No one running a race is surprised that the race involves some suffering. The runner just accepts that as a fact.

The Christian race is different from other races in that the goal is not to beat everyone else, but just to finish. It’s a long-distance race that rewards endurance over speed. The challenge is simply to keep going and not give up. One of the most famous examples of this in a literal race occurred at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. The British runner Derek Redmond was expected to be a medal winner in the 400-meter race. Halfway through the semi-final heat, he pulled his hamstring and bent over on the track in obvious pain. His pain was both physical and emotional as he grieved this lost opportunity. And then he stood straight and began limping toward the finish line, still in obvious pain. As he did so, there was another man pushing through security and running toward Derek Redmond. It was Jim Redmond, Derek’s father. As Derek leaned on his father for support, the two of them slowly made their way to the finish line. When they finally crossed it, they received a greater ovation than the winner of the race. They had finished. That is our goal. Let’s explore this race a little more deeply now.

I. Helps for the Race – v. 1-3

Every race makes demands on the racers, and helps are always welcome. Three helps for those in the Christian race are mentioned in the opening verses of the chapter. The first one is that **“we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”** This race has spectators, and they are cheering us on. The spectators in this case are the faithful who have gone before us, specifically the men and women of faith mentioned in the previous chapter. Noah is one of those spectators, reminding you that there is an ark of salvation from the waters of God’s judgment. Abraham is cheering for you too. He is shouting, “Keep going even when God’s promises are delayed. They will all be fulfilled in his good time, and they will be beyond anything you could have possibly imagined.” Joseph is there too, telling you not to be discouraged when it seems that everything is against you. Perhaps he is shouting the words of the poet

William Cowper, “The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.” Moses is there too, assuring any who forfeited status or riches to follow Christ that they have made a good decision that will never be regretted.

The second help is the advice to lay aside anything that will impede our ability to run the Christian race. The carrying of extra weight is something those in races are careful to avoid. It was the common practice in the Greek world of the New Testament for runners to compete completely naked. Cyclists will often pay a great deal of money to reduce the weight of their bicycle by a few ounces. On a road bike, the top of the line drivetrain, which includes almost everything other than the wheels and frame, is different from the next one down in only one feature. It is 10.5 ounces lighter, just over half a pound. To get that weight reduction, you have to pay an additional \$1000, almost one hundred dollars per ounce. What is the extra weight we are to lay aside? Since the next clause tells us to lay aside sin, I don’t understand this text to refer to sin in this area of extra weight. I think it’s referring to things that are not sinful but which might weigh us down and impede our ability to be faithful to Christ. For example, watching cable TV news shows is not sinful. But if it produces fear and anger in your heart, that’s a weight to set aside. Turn the TV off. The same could be said for social media. Even though there’s nothing inherently sinful about social media, it has become a weighty burden for many and may need to be set aside.

We are also to lay aside **“the sin which clings so closely.”** Sin is not just an extra weight, but something that clings to us. The idea is that it entangles a person, resulting in a fall. He is talking about unrepentant sin, the kind that we know about but tolerate in our lives. To excuse sin, to blame-shift, or to accommodate sin in any way will entangle us and lead to a fall. We lay aside sin by means of repentance and faith, which leads us to the third help spoken of in our text.

Though this third help is mentioned last, it is foundational to all the others. We are to look to Jesus and consider him. Though we are to look to Jesus as our example, that is not what is primarily in view here. He is described as the **“founder and perfecter of our faith”** (v. 2). In other words, we are to call to mind the fact that Jesus has started a grand project to reclaim lost sinners, and he will finish it. The next clause is an important one. **“For the joy that was set before him, [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”** What is the joy that was set before Jesus? It wasn’t the joy of his reunion with his heavenly Father, because he had that prior to his incarnation, and there was no necessity of the shameful cross in order for that joy to return. It must be the joy of restored fellowship with the fallen human race. Jesus endured his race by keeping his eye on the finish line, and that finish line was his joy at having you and me with him forever. So what we are being told here is to keep our eyes on the

finish line, to see Jesus seated on the throne. He's done what needed to be done to bring us there with him, and his heart is filled with joy as he contemplates this great reunion.

We are to remember the blessing of Psalm 89:15. **“Blessed are the people ...who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face.”** God's face shines, being lit up by his smile. When we are told to look to Jesus and consider him, we are being told to walk under his beaming face, a face lit by his smile toward us. Because of what Jesus has done, God's favor rests upon us. It is as we live by faith in this favor that we do not grow weary and fainthearted. That's how verse three concludes. **“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”** The shame of the cross speaks to the depth of Jesus' love for his people. This is how far he was willing to go to have you with him forever. That's our finish line, and as we keep our eyes on that, we will be sustained. Cyclists have a term for growing weary and fainthearted. We call it “bonking.” When your body has used all its fuel from carbohydrates, it begins to draw on its reserves from your fat cells. But cycling requires more energy than can be converted from fat, and you just run out of gas. At one time or another, we've all “bonked” spiritually. Our need at such times is to look at the shining face of Jesus, standing at the finish line of the race ready to greet us. We are to remember that he is not just the founder of our faith, but the perfecter as well. He's on the throne in heaven, where he rules all, and in his love and power, he is able to bring you through.

II. Discipline for the Race – v. 4-11

Endurance for the race is challenged by hardships and setbacks. They can bring such discouragement that a person wants to give up. Why does life have to be so hard? There may even be times when it gets so hard that the follower of Christ loses his life. Verse 4 says that they have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood, and the clear implication of that little word “yet” is that such martyrdom may very well lie in their future. The middle section helps by characterizing our hardship with the word “discipline.” **“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives”** (v. 5-6). When we encounter unwanted setbacks and trials in life, we are not victims of some random, unfortunate circumstances. We have a heavenly Father who loves us. Just as earthly children need discipline if they are to grow and reach their potential, so we need the same. We are being assured here that our suffering is not random, but comes from God as loving discipline.

Alexander Maclaren was a Scottish Baptist preacher in the 19th century. In a sermon on this text, he compared it to a lighthouse. When the sun is shining, the light from the lighthouse is not noticed. But when it's dark and stormy,

that light becomes essential for those out on the stormy sea. It is the same with this teaching on discipline. It becomes most precious to us during the stormy times of life.

The most precious thing about this discipline is that it affirms that we are loved by our heavenly Father. Just as earthly fathers only discipline their own children, so the presence of God's painful discipline in our lives confirms that we are loved by God. **"God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons"** (v. 7-8).

We are assured that God knows how to discipline us in order to bring good to us. The good he brings is **"that we may share his holiness"** (v. 10). This passage affirms the principle of "anti-fragility" that is featured in the book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, subtitled *How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Anti-fragility stands opposed to the idea that people are basically fragile. If we are fragile, then emphasis needs to be given to safety and to being careful not to hurt people's feelings by disagreeing with them. But the truth is that challenges and difficulties are necessary to growth as much as exercise is needful for a healthy body. A person goes to the gym to lift weights. As they begin their repetitions at the bench press, they don't say, "Oh no! Something's wrong. I'm feeling weaker the more of these presses I do." On the contrary, the weightlifter will say, "I had a really good workout today, and now I can hardly lift my arms." C. S. Lewis famously put it like this: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to arouse a deaf world."

The application of all this is simply to view our hardships with eyes of faith and see them as coming from God's hand. Specifically, we are told not to regard it lightly or to grow weary in the face of such suffering. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to relieve any suffering we encounter. It is natural and healthy to see a doctor if you're sick, or to look for a better-paying job if money runs out before the month ends. But what do you do if after all those natural steps are taken, you're still sick and you still lack sufficient income? You get up the next morning, thank God that he loves you and ask him for the grace to walk with him through your suffering for that day.

III. Rules for the Race – v. 12-17

The final paragraph contains some rules for the race, things we are to focus on as we run. First, we are to be strong and courageous. **"Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed"** (v. 12-13). Lame people are being told here to be strong. How can that

be? It is because God enables whatever he commands. When he commands us to be strong, he gives the strength, just as when he commanded the dry bones, **“O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord”** (Ezekiel 37:4), and when he commanded the dead body of Lazarus, **“Lazarus, come out”** (John 11:43). When you have grown weary and just want to give up, hear the powerful word of God to you, “Get up; be strong; I will enable what I command.”

Verse 14 tells us two additional things to focus on as we run the race. We are to **“strive for peace with everyone,”** and to strive **“for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”** These two are related to one another. If we are always fighting with others, our focus will turn away from the pursuit of holiness and be turned instead to winning the fight. So we are counseled to live in peaceful relations, both inside and outside the church, and to turn our attention to this pursuit of holiness.

Our passage concludes by informing us of our responsibility for others who are running with us. We see again in these verses the author’s high view of the church. He tells us to **“See to it that no one...”** and then mentions three things we are to see to. He doesn’t say, “See to it that *you* don’t fail to obtain the grace of God,” but that “no one fails.” Like Jim Redmond helping his son across the finish line at the 1992 Olympics, we are to help one another complete the race. There are three pitfalls we are to help one another avoid. First, we are to see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. In other words, we are to do all in our power to keep others from apostasy. Second, we are to see to it that **“no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble.”** This is a reference to a passage in Deuteronomy (29:18f) in which the root of bitterness is a person, not an attitude. We are being told here to watch for those who might use their influence to discourage and defeat others, and to resist the efforts of such people.

Finally, we are told to see to it that **“no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.”** Esau’s unholiness is similar to sexual immorality. It includes a moment of satisfaction, followed by much regret. Both sexual sin and all other sins overvalue that momentary experience and undervalue the really important things of God. We are to do all in our power to keep ourselves from that regrettable mistake and to help others avoid it as well.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with a quote from J. I. Packer. “In this world, royal children have to undergo extra training and discipline, which other children escape, in order to fit them for their high destiny. It is the same with the children of the King of Kings... He is training them for what awaits them, and chiseling them into the image of Christ. Sometimes the chiseling process is painful.”

Small Group Discussion Questions
Hebrews 12:1-17

1. Have you ever been in a race? What was that like? Think of some ways the Christian life is like a race.
2. The author mentions that there are spectators to this race of the Christian life, those who have gone before us and finished the race themselves. Are there biblical characters from the previous chapter who encourage you when you think of them as a spectator cheering you on in your race? Are there other Christians outside the Bible who encourage you similarly?
3. Can you think of any common weights that people today often need to lay aside in order to run the race with greater endurance? Are there any weights that are weighing you down that you may need to lay aside?
4. We are told here to look to Jesus and see his joy that was set before him. The joy it is referring to is his joy at the thought of being with his people for eternity. How does such a vision of Jesus' joy encourage you in your struggles? Can you give a specific example?
5. Verse 3 talks about growing weary or fainthearted. We have probably all experienced a time in our Christian lives where we have just run out of gas and lost our motivation to continue in the race. Can you remember a time like that for you? What did God use to keep you in the race?
6. Verses 4-11 characterize our sufferings as discipline, not punishment. What practical difference does it make to remember this distinction?
7. Verse 14 tells us to strive for peace and holiness. The verb "strive" has the idea of intense effort. In what way do these two things require intense effort?
8. The final three verses of the passage (15-17) communicate a responsibility we have to help others in this race. What are some practical things others have done to help you, or some practical things you can do to help others?