



Hebrews 12:1-29

Run the Christian Race with Endurance

Believers in Jesus Christ are challenged to run with endurance the race of faith. No one likes to see a runner drop out of a race. The great heavenly celebration will come at the final judgment. For the believer it will be a day of triumph and celebration. The writer of Hebrews gives strong words of encouragement to endure as runners in the race.

The apostle Paul used the metaphor of running the race of life. "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, NASB95). All Scripture references are from New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update unless otherwise noted. At the end of his life he could say with conviction: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Indeed, he ran the race well.

The focus of Hebrews 12 is on running the race with endurance. "But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings. . . For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" (Hebrews 10:32, 36).

There should be no chapter division here because Hebrews 12:1-3 is the climax to the whole argument regarding the promises in 10:19-12:3. The author makes his passionate appeal for loyalty to Jesus Christ. The "heroes of faith" in Hebrews 11 are the great "cloud of witnesses" in Hebrews 12:1. These great Old Testament saints witnessed to their faith by their words and faithfulness to the LORD God. They were "witnesses," and many of them were martyrs.

Jesus Christ is the Founder and Perfecter of our Faith (Hebrews 12:1-3)

"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The Promise Fulfilled

The strength of their faith is seen in the fact that during their lifetime they did not receive the promise, but they persisted in their faith even until death. They saw the answer to many promises, but the promise of the

coming of the Messiah still had not come. Old Testament believers had the promise, but New Testament believers have the fulfillment of the promise in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This is also true of Christians today. By faith the Old Testament saints look forward; we look back on His coming. "God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:40). We see God answering our prayers and we are blessed every day, but we look forward to the "blessed hope" when we see Jesus. Jesus has come and made the perfect atoning sacrifice for our sins, but we wait for the future realities at the consummation of all things. We enjoy His sweet presence now, but it is only a foretaste of what it shall be when we see Him in all His glory.

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

The "great cloud of witnesses" are listed in Hebrews 11. They are the faithful believers in the Old Testament who were looking forward to the coming of the Suffering Servant of the LORD, the Messiah. These believers who have gone to heaven know that Christ's sacrifice has been made, and their spirits rest in perfect fulfillment, awaiting the resurrection of their bodies.

Their testimony of what pleases God is recorded for us in the Old Testament. There is no evidence in the Scriptures of saints in heaven watching saints on the earth. Neither does it encourage Christians to pray to the saints in heaven, nor are saints in heaven praying for us here. It is an illustration of the importance of persistent faith as seen in these Old Testament saints. It is their testimony to us.

We do know that Christ is praying for us in heaven as our great intercessor and mediator before God the Father. The apostle Paul wrote: "who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Romans 8:34). The writer of Hebrews has already told us: "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). There is only one mediator between the Christian believer and God; he is Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

The Holy Spirit lives within the believer and helps us in our prayers. "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27).

The Bible teaches the priesthood of the believer and is therefore our responsibility to pray for one another and encourage each other by praying for one another. "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Let's exercise our holy priesthood praying for one another.

Take off the extra Weight

The writer of Hebrews uses the analogy of an athletic contest where each believer is likened to a participant in a footrace. The runner removed all "bulk or mass" of hindrances in order to run more efficiently. It is our responsibility to "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us . . ." (ESV). We get so easily entangled with the world affairs. The words "easily entangles us" is composed of "standing, well, around." It has the idea of skillfully surrounding to cleverly place itself around; it prevents the runner from giving his best in the contest. We get entangled with everyday affairs. These are the vulnerable, weak areas where Satan constantly tempts us. These hindrances may not be sinful in themselves, but they prevent us from making progress in our Christian life.

"The sin which so easily entangles us" is probably not a specific sin, but the characteristic of all sin as continually surrounding men and easily takes hold of us. The temptation to sin is ever present in our lives and we must be on constant guard.

Keep your eyes on Jesus

The solution to removing the weeds of life is to focus on Jesus. When we keep our eyes on Jesus we remove every weight, and sin which clings to us. "Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated the right hand of the throne of God" (ESV). Jesus is the "author and perfecter of faith" who has blazed the trail before us and completed the course. He has entered as a forerunner for us (Heb. 6:20). The word *archegos* means originator, leader or pioneer. Jesus is our *archegos*. He is also the completer or perfecter (*teleiotes*) of our faith. From the beginning to the end it is all about Jesus. How tragic that many professing believers in Jesus Christ never understand that Christianity is Christ. It is not programs, methods, organizations, fascination with dynamic leaders; it is all about Christ and an intimate personal love relationship with Him.

Jesus is "the author and perfecter of our faith," not some fascinating personality. Why should we be so distracted by others? Remember Galatians 1:10? "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ." Every pastor needs to remind himself of the words every day.

The Extreme Humiliation and Extreme Exaltation of Jesus

"The joy set before Him endured the cross" seems to point to the future (v. 2; cf. Acts 2:22-24; Isa. 53:4-6; 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6-9). Jesus obediently suffered the agony of death on the cross with its shame. Jesus suffered extreme humiliation and an extreme exaltation. With just a few words the writer of Hebrews gives us an account of the life, death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God the Father (cf. Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

This is the only passage in Hebrews that uses the word "cross." It mirrors the entire passion narrative on Jesus' death. Only the finished atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross is the foundation of our faith. Jesus endured the suffering and shame of dying on the Cross. With triumphant joy of the resurrection He sits at the right hand of the throne of God in heaven. "And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they" (Hebrews 1:3-4).

The words "Fixing our eyes on Jesus" has the idea is to look away from everything else in order to focus one's gaze on one thing. Christ is the one person that really counts. Here the idea is to neglect everything else in order to concentrate your attention on the one thing, the person of Jesus Christ. The believer looks with an utter concentration, wander in amazement of a loved one looking with adoration at his lover. It describes the believer who is lost in wonder, love and praise of His Lord and Savior.

How tragic that we live in a day when the church is lost in the wonder of worldly preachers offering material prosperity at the expense of the exaltation of Jesus. How tragic that we get lost and infatuated with the media and charismatic leaders, but are not in love with Jesus.

"Consider (*analogizomai*) Him" Jesus who has set the example of enduring faith. Think over, carefully consider by way of comparison, and ponder the person and work of Jesus and what He has accomplished for you. Compare what Jesus endured with your own less severe persecution. William Barclay observes, "The way to avoid the failure of your nerve and heart is to compare your situation with the situation of Him who met the opposition of sinners with such constancy and courage."

Jesus endured all kinds of hostility of word and deed. He went to the cross and died a vicarious, penal atoning sacrifice for our sins. What we need is a fresh encounter with Jesus Christ and a nurturing of faith in Him so that in testing of our faith we endure.

A Father's Discipline (Hebrews 12:4-17)

These believers had suffered persecution, but had not suffered martyrdom. Their problem was dealing with their own sinful nature. "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin" (Hebrews 12:4). This is probably a reference to martyrdom. Even though these believers had suffered much, none of them as far as we know had paid with their lives.

How sad the emphasis in our day that if you are a Christian and have faith you will be healthy, wealthy and happy. I have spent years ministering to believers who are literally under the gun because of their living faith in Jesus Christ. I have buried men and women who gave their lives for their faith in Him. Much of so called Christianity in our day is sham. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:10-12).

Whom God loves He disciplines.

God's discipline proves that we are His sons and daughters.

If you have not experienced the loving hand of our heavenly Father disciplining you, you need to stop and examine your relationship with Him. God's discipline proves that He considers you His son or daughter. God chastises every son and daughter because He loves them.

"You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives.' It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Hebrews 12:4-8). The author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12.

The emphasis is endurance in your Christian faith. The pain and perseverance of faith proves your sonship.

The Nature of God's Discipline

"Discipline" (*paideuo*) primarily means "to train children" suggesting a broad idea of education. It is the upbringing, training, instruction, discipline, and punishment of a minor child. In Hebrews 2:10 Jesus suffered, but it was not for His sins because He was without sin. He never experienced personal sin. "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings" (Hebrews 2:10). It is all too common to conclude that suffering is always sent by God as punishment for sin, but we must remember that Christ, God's unique one of a kind Son, knew no sin, but learned obedience through His suffering. God is concerned about the spiritual development of His children. What would our spiritual life be like if there never was any spiritual discipline? We would remain childish spiritually.

Discipline is part of God's education program for His children. God does not vent His wrath on the believer, but fosters spiritual maturity and prevents further sinfulness. This is where spiritual growth takes place. Verse eight informs us that one is either a son of the Father and share in His life and nature, or is spiritually illegitimate. All who are true sons of God are partakers of His disciplining. Only those who are born of God are obedient to God and spiritually alive (Eph. 2:1-3). As a loving Father He has right to our obedience.

The Goal of Discipline

"Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness" (Hebrews 12:9-10).

"He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness." Holiness is the goal for which God is preparing His people. One day that entire sanctification will be consummated in our manifestation with Christ in glory.

A loving father always disciplines His children for their good. Our heavenly Father always knows what is best for us. He sees the goal at the end of the race. His purpose in our discipline is to conform us to the image and likeness of His Son. One day we are going to be just like Him. What a day of rejoicing. Any suffering and discipline in our day fades in view of that great day.

His methods are always wise. Persecution is overruled by God and used for the training of His children. God is in ultimate control of all conditions. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

How do you respond to God's discipline?

"All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears" (Hebrews 12:11-17).

Holiness is expected of all Christians. The writer of Hebrews is not discussing salvation by works. He is speaking of our sanctification. We have been sanctified once-for-all by the death of Jesus. "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Hebrews 10:14). Holy living is the evidence that we have experienced regeneration, or spiritual birth. It is part of the perseverance of the believer. Every believer has obtained God's holiness judicially. We have been sanctified, i.e. set apart to God. There is also a present sanctification which is demonstrated in our daily life, and one day we will be sanctified in the future. We are to be progressively more Christ-like. Our sanctification is made possible only by obedience to the Word of God as we submit to the control of the Holy Spirit. The only way to live the Christian's life is by putting into practice the promises of the Word of God by means of the presence of the Holy Spirit living and working within us. The process will be completed only when we see Christ and finally changed into His perfect likeness.

A bitter and resentful person is like a contagious disease. They spread infection throughout the body.

Esau is described for us in Genesis 25-28. He had no interest in spiritual values. Those who repent are always forgiven. Remember Peter? We need to prepare ourselves so we can profit from God's discipline when it comes. Would you rather be an Esau or Peter?

In John 15:2-5, Jesus is not talking about salvation, but our sanctification. "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:2-5). Have you recently experienced the cutting away of all that is not profitable for fruit bearing? This skillful surgeon has never lost a patient. He knows just what to remove in our lives in order to produce Christ-likeness. Yield to His knife and you will experience spiritual growth.

Contrast Sinai and Zion (Hebrews (12:18-24))

We come to the fifth and final warning passage in Hebrews. The issue is absolute obedience to God's spoken word.

The new covenant is far superior to the old covenant at Sinai. This is a constant theme in Hebrews.

The scene at Sinai (Hebrews 12:18-21)

"For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, 'If even a beast touches

the mountain, it will be stoned.' And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, 'I am full of fear and trembling.' But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel" (Hebrews 12:18-24).

Mount Sinai symbolized God's dealings with Israel under the Mosaic covenant. Isaiah saw the glowing fire of God's holiness and received forgiveness and cleansing (Isaiah 6:1-8).

The Position of Christians (Hebrews 12:22-24)

Mount Zion symbolizes the final grace and blessing in salvation, accomplished realities foretold in the types and shadows in the Old Covenant. Jerusalem was built on Mount Zion, a hill which David captured and made his capital. In the book of Hebrews Zion is a symbol of the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Galatians 4:24-26). The living God dwells in the "new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21:2, 22, 23). It is the final home of all true believers of all ages.

This passage is filled with Old Testament imagery of a new heaven and Zion the city of God.

Believers in Jesus Christ have access in the invisible heavenly Jerusalem. Those who have died in faith in Jesus Christ are in God's presence worshiping Him awaiting their resurrection bodies when Christ returns.

In verse 23 "firstborn" is plural in the Greek and modifies "who are enrolled in heaven." Jesus was called the "firstborn" in Heb. 1:6, but here His followers are granted inheritance as if they too were firstborn sons. He writes of "the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect" (Hebrews 12:23). The church appears to be a reference to believers today who are still on the earth, but whose names are written down in heaven. They will inherit the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Heb. 13:14).

"Spirits of the righteous men made perfect" are the Old and New Testament saints. Christ's sacrifice for sin has removed their sins.

Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant purchased by His own blood (v. 24). The blood of Jesus is said to be still speaking to men. The blood of Abel cries out for vengeance, but the blood of Jesus brings forgiveness and atonement for all our sins (Gen. 4:10; Heb. 11:4). Christ appeared as a high priest and obtained eternal redemption by His blood (Heb. 9:11-14). Christ "has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" (Hebrews 9:24-28). "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh" (Hebrews 10:19-20).

A Kingdom that cannot be Shaken (Hebrews 12:25-29)

There were some people professing faith but they did not possess Christ.

"See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.' This expression, 'Yet once more,' denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:25-29).

The first shaking was physical and geographical at Sinai. Our author is referring to the second coming of Christ. Great judgments will take place at that time. "For thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land'" (Haggai 2:6). This will be the final shaking of the universe. Judgment will have come.

The only thing that will survive will be the unshakable kingdom of God which believers are now receiving, but the full consummation will only come when Jesus returns in glory.

Let us never forget, "our God is a consuming fire." He is absolutely holy. The only way radically depraved sinners can abide in His presence is by trusting the shed blood of Jesus Christ. He is the atoning sacrifice that cleanses of all sin.

Some Abiding Principles and Practical Applications

When you are running the race of life you don't have time to look around. You have to keep your eyes focused on Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the "author and perfecter of our faith." No one or anything else will do. He is the Beginning and the End. "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

When you keep your eyes on yourself you will become spiritually weary and discouraged.

We renew our strength and gain strength by wrapping ourselves around Jesus and drawing our strength from Him.

When you respond in obedience to God's loving discipline you grow in the likeness of Christ.

How you handled discipline tells a lot about your spiritual maturity. When we accept God's discipline as evidence of His love for us we demonstrate that we are indeed His children. Are you yielding to the pruning of His knife? He has never allowed His knife to slip. He cuts away the decay and rot in our spiritual lives. If there is no discipline, there is no sonship. If you are not disciplined you are illegitimate. Don't be careless in accepting divine discipline.

When God disciplines us it is so we can share in His holiness.

His goal is that we become like Him, perfect and holy. His goal is Christ-likeness. "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Our God is a consuming fire.

He is awesome and holy. The only way we can abide in His presence is by means of His cleansing blood.

Helen Lemmel's hymn says it so beautifully:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full into His wonderful face;
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

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