

Hebrews

Faith to Run the Christian Marathon

Hebrews 12:1-3

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Faith to Run the Christian Marathon

Hebrews 12:1-3

INTRODUCTION:

When I was in high school I ran track. I was a sprinter. I ran the 100 yard dash and the 220 yard run. Anything beyond that seemed impossible for me. It wasn't until Bible college that I found out that I could also run longer distances. During the summer I picked up hay to earn my way through college. This put me in pretty good shape. It turned out that my roommate ran three and four mile cross country. Dennis came into our room after his first day of practice and challenged me to run against him the next day. I thought it might be fun so I took him up on the challenge. The next afternoon we all met and ran a three mile run. I figured I would go for about a 1/2 mile and fizzle out. So I started running and, sure enough, I started getting tired before the first mile. Then I experienced something I had never felt before: a second wind! All of a sudden I had almost all of my energy back. It turned out that I finished second in the group after my very first attempt. This encouraged me to run cross country.

I do not know if you have run long distances or not. If you have, then you understand the necessity of dedication and endurance. If you are a couch potato type, maybe you have seen a marathon race on TV that will help you to relate to today's message. Our text is comparing our Christian life on this earth to a long distance race.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Hebrews 12:1-3 (NASB95)

12 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, ² 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.

Prayer

The author originally exhorted his readers back in chapter 10.

Hebrews 10:36 (NASB95)

³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

Then he devoted chapter 11 to many examples of Old Testament saints who endured by **faith** despite the fact that they had not yet received "the promise" (which was Christ). A promise that, we in the new covenant, **have** received. In our text, he returns to the theme

of running our Christian marathon with endurance. Our faith must focus on Jesus, who endured the cross and received the reward.

The Christian life is a lifelong, grueling race that entails some long hills to climb and some difficult areas to plod through. To make it to the end, you need self-discipline to be in great shape. You will need to maintain your motivation and sustained effort. No one enters a marathon with the thought of dropping out after a mile. Finishing well is everything. In this race, you are not competing with other believers. We are all on the same team. We are competing against the enemy of our souls, who opposes God's kingdom and wants us to drop out.

To run the Christian Marathon we can...

BODY:

I. Derive Encouragement from Old Testament Saints.

Hebrews 12:1a (NASB95)

12 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us,

We, once again, see the word "therefore". So we have to ask "What is it there for?"

The opening phrase of 12:1 refers back to chapter 11. Athletes in a race were surrounded by rows and rows of spectators, pictured for us as "a great cloud of witnesses". The "witnesses" of the believers' race are listed in the previous chapter of Hebrews: the men and women of God whose faithful lives were recorded in the Old Testament. These saints persevered despite all sorts of trials by faith and were commended for their faithfulness. The word "witness" might suggest that they are watching us from above. But there is no indication in the Bible that those in heaven are watching us on earth. The point of the passage is that their testimony lives on. Their unyielding faith bears witness to the promises of Jesus Christ, urging us to follow their example and "run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

They are calling out to us by their examples of faith, "Keep going, I made it and you can, too! I know it is hard, but the reward is worth it! Do not quit! The finish line is not too far away!"

By studying these men and women of faith, you will learn how they failed, so that you do not have to make the same mistakes. And you will learn how they ran well, so that you can imitate their faith.

The primary thing is self-discipline motivated by the goal of finishing well. But it specifically involves two things:

II. Lay Aside Every Encumbrance and Sin.

Hebrews 12:1b (NASB95)

...let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us,

The word "encumbrance" means **weight**. It can refer to physical weight, such as obesity, or to carrying unnecessary baggage. Ancient Greek runners would actually run naked so as not to be encumbered. Olympic athletes in our day wear some pretty skimpy outfits. They do not want anything to slow them down or drain their energy.

ILLUSTRATION:

Picture the start of the Boston Marathon. The lean, muscular Kenyan runners are at the front of the pack, waiting for the starting gun. A couple of skinny American runners are there, too. But next to them is a fat, flabby guy wearing a parka, all-weather pants, hiking boots, with a 50-pound pack. You ask curiously, "What's in your pack?" He says, "I've got all the sodas and Twinkies that I will need to finish this race." You are thinking, "Right!" That guy would not stand a chance of finishing, let alone winning, because he has not laid aside every encumbrance.

Encumbrances are distinguished here from sins. They include things that are not intrinsically wrong, but they are wrong because they keep you from running as you should. If you got rid of those heavy hiking boots and put on some jogging shoes, you would run better. If you dropped the pack and dressed in shorts and a tank top, you might finish the race.

How can these "encumbrances" apply to us. Let's say that in the morning, you do not have time to read your Bible **and** the newspaper before you head out the door to work or school. Which do you choose? You protest, "But I need to keep abreast of what is happening in the world!" Really? Where does the Bible say that?

1 Peter 2:1-3 (NASB95)

2 Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, ² like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, ³ if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

Maybe you don't have time to read **anything** because you do not set your alarm early enough to spend just 10 minutes with the Lord. You need to shed the encumbrance of loving sleep or the paper more than God.

Too much recreation can be another encumbrance in the race. We all need **some** free time to be renewed, but the question is, "How much time do you need?" Many Christians fill every evening watching TV or playing computer games, but they do not have time to study the Bible or read good books. They view the entire weekend as a time for recreation, even if it means missing church. To run the race, you have got to lay aside these encumbrances.

Some Christians ask the wrong question here. They ask, "What is wrong with this movie, or listening to this music, or participating in this activity?" The right question is, "Does this help me to grow in godliness?" If not, cast it off as dead weight.

In the case of sin, you must totally get rid of it if you want to run the Christian race.

Sin always begins in the mind, and so we must judge all sin at the thought level. Pride, lust, envy, greed, anger, grumbling, selfishness—all of these things originate in our thought life. If you cut it off there, it goes no farther. If you entertain these things, they incubate and develop into sinful words and actions.

James 1:14-15 (NASB95)

¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. ¹⁵ Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

But the author's point is, you cannot run the Christian race if you keep tripping over your sins.

III. Run with Endurance the Course Set Before Us.

Hebrews 12:1c (NASB95)

...and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

Note two things:

A. God Sets the Course.

If you are running a marathon, you cannot make up your own course. If you stray from the course, you will be disqualified. The race is “set before us” just as Jesus had “the joy set before Him.” God is the Sovereign One who sets the course for each of us, just as He set the course of the cross for Jesus.

To finish the Christian marathon, it is important to keep in mind at all times that the Sovereign God sets the course. You may not like parts of the course. You may be prone to grumble, “Why did the course have to go over this hill, or through this swamp?” The answer is, “Because the Sovereign God planned it this way.” You won't be able to run by faith unless you submit your will to His will.

B. We Must Run with Endurance.

Running with endurance requires adopting a certain mindset. If you have in mind that you are running a 400-meter race, you are not going to do well when the pack keeps going after 400 meters. When you learn that the race has barely begun, you are going to quit with a bad attitude.

This is what Jesus meant when He talked about counting the cost of following Him.

Luke 14:28-33 (NASB95)

²⁸ For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand *men* to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

Before you make a glib commitment to be a Christian, think it through. Are you willing to put out the effort, the sweat, the endurance, and the pain of going the distance? If not, do not start the race, because you are going to look pretty silly when you drop out after 400 meters!

Obviously, one key to running the whole distance is motivation. But where do you get the motivation to run the Christian marathon? Our author suggests two sources, both valuable, but the second is incomparably greater than the first.

IV. Run with Endurance by Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus.

Hebrews 12:2a (NASB95)

² fixing our eyes on Jesus,

One source of encouragement came from the "cloud of witnesses". But our main motivation is Jesus Himself. That requires true faith on our part. Jesus is the author or Captain of that kind of faith, and He brings it to perfection or completion.

The name "Jesus" deliberately focuses on His humanity. As a man, Jesus showed us exactly how to live by faith in God in this world. He trusted God at the beginning of His ministry when Satan tempted Him. He relied on God to such a degree that He could claim...

John 5:19 (NASB95)

¹⁹ Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless *it is* something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.

He also claimed to speak the very words that He heard from the Father.

John 8:28 (NASB95)

²⁸ So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.

He trusted the Father in the Garden and He went to the cross entrusting His soul to the Father.

His final words included, "**Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit**".

We are to take our eyes off of other things and focusing on Jesus alone. The Bible tells us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith.

2 Corinthians 13:5 (NASB95)

⁵ Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?

But, we should not live with our focus constantly on ourselves, but rather, on the Lord. In your daily quiet time, it is good to pause and examine your heart. Is there any sin you need to confess? Is there a bad attitude or a lack of faithfulness? Turn your eyes toward Jesus!

V. Recognize Jesus as the Author and Perfecter of Our Faith.

Hebrews 12:2a (NASB95)

² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith,

A. Jesus is the Author of Faith.

Jesus is the source of life, salvation, and faith. It also refers to the **leader or captain**, the one who goes before the troops, showing them the way.

All of these senses of the word apply to Jesus with regard to our faith. No sinner is capable of believing in Christ for salvation unless He grants it. But, also, He blazes the trail of faith for all who follow Him. He goes before us, showing us how to live by faith in God alone.

B. Jesus is the Perfecter of Faith.

This means that He finished the course of faith perfectly, showing **us** how to finish well. But also, He brings our faith to completion, as Paul states...

Philippians 1:6 (NASB95)

⁶ 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.

C. Jesus is the Primary Motivation to Endure by Faith.

Hebrews 12:2a (NASB95)

² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross,

The reason that Jesus could endure the horrible prospect of bearing our sin was that He focused on the joy set before Him. This joy included the joy of “**bringing many sons to glory**”. But also, the greatest joy was that of glorifying the Father by completing the work that the Father gave Him to do. When Jesus returned to heaven, triumphant over Satan, sin, death, and hell, the angels rejoiced. Keeping that glorious joy in view enabled Jesus to endure the agony of the cross.

D. Jesus is the Ultimate Example of Enduring Faith.

Hebrews 12:2b (NASB95)

who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame,

No one has ever endured a greater trial than the cross. Others have been crucified and still others have been tortured in horrendous ways. But only Jesus knew the glory and joy of perfect fellowship with the Father in heaven before coming to this earth. Only Jesus knew the perfect holiness of His divine nature. To leave heaven and take on the form of a servant and be obedient to His death on the cross as the substitute for our sins, is unmatched in human history.

VI. Jesus Shows us the Final Reward of Faith.

Hebrews 12:2c (NASB95)

and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

He is in the most exalted place in the universe, the place of all rule and authority. The holy angels bow before Him in adoration and reverence. While Jesus is unique, His exaltation to the right hand of the throne of God shows us a glimpse of His glory that we will share throughout eternity, if by faith we run with endurance.

CONCLUSION:

Hebrews 12:3 (NASB95)

³ For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Just as Jesus balanced the joy set before Him against the cross, so we must consider the fact that the more committed we are to Jesus, the more those who oppose Him will oppose us, no matter how nice we try to be.

John 15:20 (NASB95)

²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

We understand that the joy of knowing and obeying Jesus is greater than all of the rejection, anger, ridicule, or anything worse that we might have to bear for His sake.

Just as a runner who is not in excellent condition gradually slows down and finally collapses, so the believer who does not keep looking with faith to Jesus will eventually collapse. We call it "burn out" today, and it seems that there are many who are weary in their souls in the Christian marathon. The remedy is to refocus our eyes on Jesus.

Seeing that the race God set out for us is a lifelong marathon, we must commit ourselves to run to the very end. A daily regimen of prayer, worship, reading God's Word, and examining our lives for impediments will help. We will persevere by maintaining a Christ like attitude even in the midst of trials. In order to succeed you must focus on Jesus and the joy of receiving the crown of righteousness that He has promised to all who finish the course. We have to keep our eyes on the prize!

You cannot run the race if you have never entered it. If you have never put your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you are not even in the race. If you do not enter the race and run with endurance, you will not receive the prize.

What a Day That Will Be!