
Enduring Hardship While Running the Race

Hebrews 11:39-12:3

Introduction The Book of Hebrews was written to a church that was getting old and was settling into the world and losing its wartime mentality and starting to drift through life without focus, without vigilance, and without energy. Their hands were growing weak, their knees feeble. It was just easier to meander in the crowd of life than to run the marathon.

It is a dangerous place to be, as a church and as individuals. So here comes the great question this text asks. “Do you (not would you – do you) choose hardship and do you suffer hardship for Jesus?”

This text asks this question in two great analogies: a race to be run and discipline to be endured. In the light of these two great analogies, there are warnings to be heeded. So let’s remind ourselves of how we came here through the text and pick up this analogy of running the race.



Read Hebrews 10:26, 32, 36, 39; 11:39-12:3

Our Motivation

(11:39-12:1a)

Before we can set out to run hard and finish well, we have got to be motivated. There are many compelling reasons for enduringly running the race. In this text, the motivation does not come from spectators, but from prior participants. There is nothing that inspires and motivates me to play soccer well than watching an accomplished player play with superb skill. That is the motivation of this text.

Who They Are

These witnesses are the Old Testament saints whose faith is commended in chapter 11. It is not just those whose names appear, but a great mass of men and women whose faith stands firm in fulfillment and in failure.

How They Witness

The word here is never used of someone who is a mere observer. The point here is not that we ought to behave in such a way because these people are watching us. They are not observers (and neither are your Christian relatives who have died) of this world’s struggles. The word is “one who testifies.” They are people who have experienced something or seen something to which they are bearing witness. It is through the pages of Scripture that they bear witness. We read of their lives, their faith, their struggles, their accomplishments and defeats and see them prizing God and treasuring Jesus and clinging to promises. So we hear their testimony. We go back and read and reflect and ponder deeply the significance of what their lives say to us.

What They Say

They tell us that true faith endures. They tell us to keep on believing the promises of God and trusting the purposes of God.

Faith is measured, not by what it receives, but by what it endures (v.39). These Old Testament saints say to us, “Believe God in an obeying way even if you never see the promises fulfilled in your lifetime.” God approves of this kind of faith.

Faith is motivated, not by the immediate, but by the providential purposes of God (v.40). Underscore two phrases in your Bibles: *planned something better for us and together with us*. God’s purposes and plans were to bring about the complete fulfilling of His promises for all His saints together. So we also are straining forward and looking toward that day when they and we *together* will fully receive the longed for and eagerly anticipated reward.

As one author puts it:

So we are surrounded in the Scriptures by men and women whose lives tell us that real faith endures until eternity. They have gathered along the sidelines of our race and they hold out their wounds and their joys and give us the best high-fives we ever got: “Go for it! You can do it. By faith you can lay down weights and sins. By faith you can run well. By the assurance of better things hoped for, you can do it. I know it can be done, I did it. Run RUN!” [John Piper]

Our Preparation

(v.1a)

Before every race, there is preparation. Our author does not point us to the preparation of practice, as important as that may be. If you watch track stars now a days, you can easily see what this verse is saying to us. The fastest men and women in the world today run in little-bitsy shorts and tops and the lightest weight shoes they can afford. They are concerned about weights. Some of us have watched when racers got entangled while running and the disaster that followed. Some of us have experienced in our own lives and run for Christ the disheartening and sometimes disastrous effect of hindering weights and entangling sins.

If we are going to run well, there are some things we have to deal with. Running well means dealing with encumbrances and entanglements.

Hindering weights

The Hebrew Christians were carrying around hindering weights. They were trying to run the Christian race encumbered by their religious heritage. Some had been unwilling to make the break with Judaism. They were weighted down with legalism. They had not fully entered into the freedom in Christ that liberated them for sacrificial love. So there is a kind of hindering weights that come from carrying around religious legalism. We are trying to run yet we are hindered. Legalism hinders our relationship with God, turning it into a debtor instead of a grace relationship. It hinders our relationship with others, turning us into enforcers of rules. It hinders us inwardly, burdening our conscience and fettering our emotions. I tell you, loved ones, there is no greater sense of weights lifted than when God’s grace freed from the bondage of legal living and freed me for sacrificial loving.

But there is another side to this as well. There are things in the Christian life that may be allowed, but will become a hindrance to my endurance. This is an important category for us, and especially for our young people. It is an important category in our finances and our relationships. Will this, what ever it is, hinder me from running well? Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with this or that,” we ask, “Is it in the way of greater faith and greater love and greater purity and greater courage and greater humility and greater patience and greater self-control?” (Piper) We need to ask this over our music, our reading, our movies, our TV, our sports, our relationships, our money, our things.

How many more people would be here this evening if they had not been hindered by weights? So ask: Does it help me RUN the race!?

Entangling sins

Then there are the sins that entangle our legs and tie us up so that we not only do not run well, but actually fall down and fail to finish. Sin will keep us from running well. It will deftly and cleverly entwine itself around us ever tightening its deathly grip until we are no longer running the race because we are completely absorbed in battling the sin. I can tell you that if you are going to deal with entangling sins, you have got to be utterly committed to running and finishing well. Otherwise, the battle with sin, with its victories and setbacks, will become a substitute for the race itself.

Now why do I call these preparations when in our text they look like exhortations? It is quite proper to translate middle voice participles as commands, but in doing so we miss something very important. Having these motivating witnesses and having dealt with hindering weights and entangling sins, we are now ready for main exhortation.

The Exhortation

(v.1b)

“Run with endurance the course marked out for us.” I am not normally given to picking apart sentences (O, ok, a lot of times I am) but this is a powerful sentence full of grace enabling, faith building hope giving truth

Run

Christians are running a race. We are not meandering. We are not out for a nice long jog taking whatever turns will eventually bring us to our home. It is something that we set out on purpose. We hold that heavenward purpose in our hearts and run with all our grace given might for the glory of Jesus. So we need to think more about running and living on purpose.

With endurance

The Christian race is a marathon. It is not a sprint. I had friend in High School who was a phenomenal runner. When we would run laps for soccer, he often, over 3 miles could lap the whole team twice. He could run and run with amazing endurance. We need to get this right as Christians. We are running a marathon. And we need endurance. There are times we are going to “hit the wall” and we need to press through. There are times we will be running into a headwind. There are times when we will be surging along with teammates and times when we will be plodding along alone.

Sometimes there will be helpful friends with bottles of water and encouraging words. And always there will be the enemies of our souls with traps and detours and trips. Then there are the failings of sin and the weakness of the flesh. O, Christian, run with endurance!

The course marked out

This is a fascinating word here. It is the word for a contest of events. It is more than just a racetrack laid out, a marked path for running. It is the idea of a decathlon. We are running through the Christian life and it is not the long toil of an indoor mile. It is the life long run through grueling events whose tasks test our strength and demand great endurance. And it is a marked out course. Some Christians sadly are running with all their might, but they have gotten off course. So, Christian, run the course!

Our Participation

(v.2)

Verse 2 in some translations looks like a command. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” Better translations pick up the Greek with its present active participle. So, we can read it this way, “Looking away from ourselves to Jesus, the leader and the finisher of the faith, who because of the joy set before Him endured the cross thinking nothing of [its] shame and at the right [hand] of the throne of God has taken His seat.”

Its Obstacle

In this verse is the key to all that has gone before. Dealing with hindering weights and entangling sins so that we run well with endurance is done by fixing our eyes on Jesus. The verb here has the idea of looking away from self in order to look on something else. So we are to look away from self and gaze on our Savior. Loved ones, in my own life, self is at the heart of all my hindering weights and entangling sins. When I stumble and struggle and don’t run well and find myself spiritually out of breath, it is normally because I have become self-centered. Looking away from self to Jesus is the skill that running the Christian life well demands.

Its Focus

Why do we look away to Jesus? Because Jesus is the origin of our faith and He is the perfecter of our faith. Believing God in an obeying way is the gift of Jesus to us – He is its author in our own lives. He creates it in us. And enduring all the way out to the end, finishing is His doing as well. Now that does not make us passive. No, we still run in faith, looking away to Jesus to keep on giving the measures of faith needed.

What is the central principle of faith running? It is the cross. Let us never ever forget this. We are looking away from self to Jesus who went to a cross kind of death in exchange for the gladness of His glorious supremacy. He thought nothing of even the shame of the kind of death He went to (in our culture, He went to an electric chair or to a hanging). He endured the cross in exchange for the crown.

The best running Christians do is when they are looking away from themselves to Christ and the cross with hearts aching for the gladness of the glorious crowning of our Sovereign and Savior.

Our Danger

(v.3)

I want to focus on the last phrase in this verse. Here is the great danger to our running with endurance. We grow weary and lose heart.

Its Description

Some of you are just beginning your run. And right now it is new and exciting and full of hope and potential. It is hard to imagine that this race can become wearisome and soul deadening. But it happens. It is a constant danger.

Some of you know that this is exactly where you are. You have been running with all your might. And now you are just exhausted. Granted, you've been lugging around a lot of hindering weights and there have been a number of entangling sins, but right now you have simply lost heart. Frankly, you are like a triathlon athlete who is on the final leg and your heart is simply not in it any more.

What is lost here is *hope*. I've been there. There have been times when I felt like it was simply not worth it. I looked away from Christ and set my gaze on me and became entangled in sin and weighted down with encumbrances and I lost heart. But, thanks be to God, His grace stirred up in my heart faith to do what the first part of the verse tells us to do.

Its Solution

“Consider Jesus who endured.” Over against the stress and struggle and strain of our trying to run well, when our hearts fail, compare our lives with Jesus'. He ran with endurance the race to the crown *through the kind of sinful opposition that nailed Him to the cross*. Is that what you are facing. Is there anyone among you here who facing the kind of opposition from sinful people that is going to end in your martyrdom? I think not. And none of you are going to die as utterly holy yet bearing someone else's sin.

Sounds a bit foreign in our ears doesn't it? There are not 12 steps of action here. There is an intense and personal struggle. I will not tell you what this struggle looks like in my life lest you think it is the best for you. But I will tell you this, you need to plan your run for Jesus this spring. You need sit down alone away from distractions and look away from self to Jesus. You need to carefully evaluate your hindering weights and entangling sins and you *must give them up*. You must realize that running with endurance is costly and demands sacrifice. Weigh that cost against the cross. Exchange present pain for heavenly gain.

So run, loved ones.

Conclusion

- **Read the Bible.** Listen to the faith and hope and love of the saints in the Scripture. Look at how they endured. Be encouraged to keep looking at Jesus because they did even when their sight would be dim and shadowy. Though they are dead, hear them cheering you on, “Run, well, Christian. The gladness and the glory are worth the hardship and pain. RUN!”
- **Prepare for running well** by setting aside time to deal with those hindering weights and entangling sins. It does not just happen. It is something that grace enables you to do.
- **Run with endurance.** What is there to say? Just go, Christian, go.
- **Be on the alert** for spiritual weariness and faintness of heart. In the moments when faith fails, then look away to Jesus. Ask Him for greater faith and finishing faith. And say to yourself all through your run this spring and summer and fall and till you hit the finish line in eternity—say to yourself over and over again, **“The present suffering is not even worthy to be compared to glory that follows. The pain is worth the gain.”**