

Hebrews 12:1-15

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[0 : 00] And the main exhortation for us this evening is there in verse 1, Hebrews 12 verse 1, Let us run with endurance the race marked out for us.

But the race in question isn't parkrun, nor is it one of those amazing ultra-marathons. It is the arduous course of the Christian life.

Now the imagery works well as a parallel, doesn't it, when you think about it? Because when you think about the comparison, like any race, the Christian life, it has a start, it begins.

There are challenges along the way. There is a time lapse between the start and the finish. And then there is a reward, a great reward at the end.

And of course, it all requires endurance, perseverance, not giving up. Now in the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, if you were here last week, we were told of the faithful endurance of the men and women of old.

[1 : 09] By faith, we were told that these Old Testament saints who had experienced great hardship for their devotion to God, they endured. And that great list that we went through in chapter 11, they're not just there so that we can celebrate those people, that we can remember them fondly and think how well they did, but they provide for us an example to follow.

Look again at verse one. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also. These examples of the past are held out to us to motivate the same kind of faith-filled obedience and endurance in the Christian lives of this present generation.

And it's true, isn't it, that in any sport, those who have gone before motivate us to perform. The British Lions squad was announced this week after much anticipation, the squad was announced. The night before the squad was announced, the captain went to a special dinner with a number of the past captains. Then the players who were selected, they will have received texts from previous British Lions congratulating them on being selected and reminding them of the honor that it is. Before the first test, and probably the second and the third as well, you can be sure they'll wheel in some hero from years gone by. If he can still get on a plane, they'll probably get Willie John McBride out there, and he will give one of his inspiring talks.

[2 : 41] That, having presented them with their jerseys, he will tell them of the honor that it is to play for this team. The connection with those who have gone before gives you a sense of responsibility then, you see, to step up.

He'll say something like, we did it in our day, now it's your turn. You've got to do the same. These are the great cloud of witnesses, if you like, whose faithfulness to the cause motivates this current generation to go and do the same.

It's the same kind of motivation in Hebrews chapter 12, as the author is calling his hearers weary with hardship, weary because they face persecution, weary because they're being opposed for naming the name of Jesus to join him and to run with endurance the race that is set before us.

The author brings himself into it with him. He uses the plural. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. And so it is for every generation of Christians who follow.

The question for us, though, is how do we do it? We can see the motivation. We can see that all of those who have gone before us, all the greats of the Old Testament that are listed in chapter 11, they've done great things.

[3 : 53] It's now our turn to step up. We can see that we're going to follow in line, but how do we do it? How do you actually endure when following Christ is costly and painful?

The witnesses can't run for you. It's great hearing their names. It's great motivation, but they can't run the race for us. So how do you press on to the finish line? That's the question before us this evening.

And the author gives us three things. First of all, he gives us something to do. Secondly, he gives us somewhere to look. And thirdly, something to remember. Something to do.

Somewhere to look. And something to remember. And if we put those together, we have all that we need to be able to endure and run with endurance in the face of difficulty, in the face of struggles and persecution.

So point number one, let's get into it. Something to do. Verse one. Here is something to do.

[5 : 15] And then, let's get into your kit to run if you're going to run. Now, I know some of you are into running. You don't, when you go running and want to get a good time, run with a pocket full of change, do you? Or with a bunch of keys in your pocket.

If you're going to run and you need your key, you'll take it off the ring and you'll put it in one of those nice, neat little key pockets that they give you in the shorts. Or if you're not, if you don't have one of those pockets, you'll maybe tie it to the drawstring around your waist or something like that.

Yet, don't fill your pockets with heavy things if you're going to try and run and get your personal best. When Keely Hodgkinson is introduced at the stadium, when she comes in for her race and she's waving to everybody, she's usually taking her tracksuit off, isn't she?

Because any kind of hindrance is removed to give the best chance of success in the race. It's the same in the Christian life. And the possible hindrances come in two categories.

He gives us two categories. Every weight and sin. Every weight. Well, that's a bit like wearing a duffel coat to run a marathon.

[6 : 24] Or as some people did in the London Marathon, a superhero costume. You know that they're not taking it seriously, are they? They're not trying to get a personal best and finish the race in good nick. Now, those things, they're not bad in themselves.

If you want to run the marathon in a duffel coat, knock yourself out. You want to wear a superhero costume. Well, there was a guy for years who ran the Belfast Marathon. He owned a French restaurant. He ran it with a tray with a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses on it.

Every year it was his thing. Nothing morally wrong with that. But it hinders your progress if you're going to finish the race. And in the Christian race, those things need to be laid aside.

So what are the things that might be holding you back from running the race of faith? Petty distractions. Petty distractions. It is the nemesis, the preacher's nemesis of choice these days.

But what is top of the list of petty distractions? What is it you tell me? Your phone. Our phones. We set out to pray or we set out to do anything worthwhile, but then notifications.

[7 : 29] Bing! Bing! Bzz! They drag us into the vortex of our phones. Might be social media. Might be something else. But our time is gone. How much value in life is slashed by Instagram?

Or by YouTube jolly shorts? Let's be honest. We're hindered, aren't we? It might not be morally bad in themselves.

But we're hindered rather than spurred on in the race. What about life goals? We put our career or our personal success as the top priority in the list.

We want to be serious about Jesus, but we're putting actually our success and our career goals at the top. What does that do? It makes us, it leads us to make decisions that will inevitably hinder our progress, like overworking at the expense of our soul.

Or chasing promotion. And what that does, it means in order to get the promotion you need to keep moving. You need to keep going to the next job, even if it's in another place. Even if it's nowhere near a good church.

[8 : 32] You never really settle and put roots into a church. Hard work is a good thing. Ambition is not necessarily a bad thing. But when those things are pursued as a priority, they will stunt our progress in the Christian life.

Another thing might be a particular vision of life. So we want to travel while we're single. It takes us away from church. Later on, we want to move in order to get the dream house or to be in a school catchment area, regardless of whether there's a good church in the area.

Making our lives revolve around our children's interests. Even if that takes you away from worship or being together with God's people on the Lord's Day or time with the family in the Bible.

Later still, a retirement plan that does the same. You think, well, I've done my bit and I'm not going to be always on the move now. I make life all about me rather than passing on my wisdom to the coming generation.

Still serving in the life of the church. While we have breath in our bodies, we are in the race. You will run differently when you're older, but you keep going.

[9 : 41] One of the encouraging things about being part of this church over the last few years, I should say, is that so many older people faithfully serving. So many older people doing just that.

Using their retirement well. Now, travelling, moving house, children having hobbies, rest and retirement, they're not bad things. Not bad things at all.

In many ways, good things. But I know plenty of people for whom these have been weights that have held them back in running the race. They've remained at a level of maturity in the Christian life that they should have exceeded many years ago.

And in some cases, more than a few cases, those things have caused people to stop running altogether. Every weight. Well, what about sin?

That's the second category, sin. It's obviously more obvious that sin is going to hinder you. But when we persist in sin, when we play around with it, when we don't repent of it, it feels...

[10 : 43] Well, the image here, it's so accurate, it feels like it coats us with glue. So when we're running, our feet are stuck. And eventually, we spiritually grind to a halt.

You can't expect, none of us can expect to make real progress in the race of the Christian life if you don't persistently lay aside sin. And don't we know how closely it clings?

It's always there. It's always there. We need to be ruthless in constantly laying it aside. There is always a direct line between unconfessed sin and some lack of progress in the Christian life.

Whether it is a coolness to the things of Christ, or a lack of joy in your own experience, or a sense of distance in your relationship with God. If you are harboring unconfessed sin, by which I mean things in your life that you know are sinful, but you persist in doing them anyway, you will not be able to finish the race marked out for you.

Lay it aside. Confess it. Some of us, we find ourselves in this situation and we don't know how to get out. The way that you get out is that you confess it.

[11 : 55] You bring it into the light and receive the forgiveness and restoration that comes in the gospel. When you do that, what will happen? You'll feel able to run again.

When you confess your sin, when we confess our sin, it is an unburdening. That's what we're doing. We're not coming to Christ again. We're not becoming a Christian all over again.

What we're doing is taking the burden of sin off our shoulders, leaving it at the cross of Christ, and running again in the race marked out for us. Confessing sin is painful in the moment, but it is an unburdening.

When you let it go, your feet move swiftly, and your progress will go up and up and up. Something to do.

Lay aside anything that will hold you back. Now, whether it's the finish line or the podium, every athlete that succeeds needs to fix their sights on something up ahead, and it's no different than this race.

[12 : 57] So here's the second point. Somewhere to look. We've been told what the something to do is. Now we need somewhere to look. That's verses 2 and 3. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before 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 at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted. Sprinters typically talk about having a point at the end of the track that when they get down into the blocks and they get themselves ready and they look up, they fix their gaze on that point and they hold it there the whole way from gun to tape.

We're to run our race with a similar kind of focus. And the object of our gaze is to be the Lord Jesus Christ. And we look to him for a number of reasons.

We look to him as the founder and perfecter of our faith. As founder, through running the race of faith perfectly himself, he has opened the way to God. He has made the life of faith that saves and reconciles us to the Father possible.

And this message about him is what stirs faith in us. He is the founder of our faith. He has enabled us to be reconciled to God. And when we fix our eyes on that reality, it motivates us to keep going.

[14 : 26] He is also perfecter. He is the perfecter. Hebrews, we've seen, uses this language of perfection a lot. And what we know is that Jesus was himself perfected through suffering.

Chapter 2, verse 10. And so he obtained perfection for all who believe in and obey him. That's chapter 5, verse 9. It says this, And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

But what's in view here is that through the shame of the cross and the subsequent victory of resurrection and ascension that we've just heard about, we've just confessed, Jesus has fulfilled God's promises and given our faith a perfect foundation on which to stand.

Your faith is grounded in those realities. And it is real and it is based on solid ground.

And so we can stand. And can you see, actually, this puts us in a better place than the great rule call of Old Testament witnesses. We have seen the perfection of Christ's finished work.

[15:35] We have seen what they look forward to. And so we have an even bigger reason, even better grounds for our faith. He is the founder and perfecter of our faith.

We look to him for that reason. But we also look to him as the forerunner to victory. He is our forerunner to victory. The author uses this name. Here do you see? Jesus. Not Christ.

Not Lord. He does that to emphasize his humanity and so highlight the solidarity that he has with those of us who follow him. And just as Jesus was faithful and has now triumphed, so he will bring all who are joined to him through to glory as well.

The conclusion of our race is to be in the presence of God for eternity. And because Jesus, our forerunner, is now at the right hand of the Father in heaven, we can be sure that we will one day follow.

You fix your eyes on Jesus as the one who has gone ahead of us into glory and is bringing us with him. And then we also fix our eyes on him as an example of suffering.

[16:46] In his earthly life, Jesus was a perfect example of faith, perfect example of trust in God, and yet his life was marked by suffering. At every turn, his life was marked by suffering.

The first hearers of this were on the cusp of giving up because they were experiencing suffering and hardship for Christ's sake. And the author here, in pointing them and in pointing us to Christ here, he is saying that the path to glory necessarily involves suffering.

Christ endured the cross for the joy set before him. The joy of the completion of his work of redemption. The triumph of his finished work and his return to glory and the Father's presence. He endured the cross in order to accomplish that. So if Christ, our forerunner, had to endure the cross, verse 3, he had to endure the hostility of others.

And if, as we saw last week, some of the Old Testament saints were sawn in two for their faith, 1138, then we must expect that we have to walk the same path.

[17:59] There is only one path that leads to glory. And it is the cross-shaped path that Christ walked ahead of us as an example for us to follow.

If anyone will come after me, Jesus says, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Suffering for the sake of Christ is inevitable.

It is normal. It is the regular Christian life. And Jesus has gone ahead of us. We fix our eyes on him because he gives us an example of how to live in that way.

Well, things aren't as bad as they could be. Verse 4, do you see? In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. Like us, these first hearers haven't yet gone to the stake for their faith.

So they and us can crack on. Keep running. While we still have breath in our bodies, we can keep running.

[19:12] So consider Jesus. Look to him. Look to Jesus as you run. You can trust him as the founder and perfecter of your faith.

You will draw confidence that as your forerunner, he has completed the race and he enjoys his father's pleasure. And that means that that day is coming for you. And in his faithful suffering, you see suffering isn't a surprise.

You have an example to follow. When you look to him in this light, it will keep you going. If you're on the cusp of giving up because you think it's not worth it, look to Jesus.

And for all of those reasons, that will motivate you and that will keep you going. You won't grow weary and give up. Your experience might be weary, but you won't grow weary to the point of giving up.

Somewhere to look. Jesus, our redeemer and our guide. And finally, the author tells us that in running the race of faith, there is thirdly something to remember.

[20 : 24] Something to remember. Verses 5 to 11. Verse 5, And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 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. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.

God is treating you as sons. The author here feels the need to jog his hearer's memory. It's like he's saying, have you forgotten what was promised in the Old Testament?

Have you forgotten Proverbs chapter 3? The Lord disciplines his children. And therefore, this is a mark of his love. These struggles that you're going through are not pointless.

They are an expression of the loving discipline of your loving Heavenly Father, who knows what you need in order that you persevere to glory. Good earthly fathers discipline their children to help them learn right and wrong.

[21 : 36] Proverbs said, if you don't do that as a father, it's a disaster. You're storing up all kinds of trouble for your children. It's a mark of your love that you would discipline them to train them in the ways of life that will help them grow and flourish.

That's verses 7 and 8. It's no different with God, except he does it perfectly. It's important that we see the link in the letter more widely.

Back in chapter 2, we were told that God's plan was not just to perfect Jesus as Son through his suffering, but that he would be the pioneer of many sons whom God would lead to glory. Chapter 2, verse 10.

So here, when he describes his hearers as sons whom he is disciplining, whom he is training towards holiness, verse 10, he disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness, share his holiness.

We see that he isn't just treating his children like the way a father does their child, but he is treating us as his own sons. In the midst of our struggles, remember that these trials are the loving discipline of our Father who is treating us like Jesus.

[22 : 46] One commentator says this, One commentator says this, The sufferings experienced by these discouraged and dispirited Christians are the very means by which they are now to be educated, disciplined, into the status of sons like the Son of God, Jesus.

Struggles for us under the hand of God are his loving discipline. And he disciplines us because he loves us.

And his discipline is making us like his son. It's so important to remember this when things are tough. And I know that some of you are really going through it at the minute.

Because in that case, the temptation is often to think that God is punishing you. Or to think that he doesn't love you. Or to think that he's busy doing something else and he's forgotten little old you down here.

Do you not see what I'm going through, Lord? Have you kind of busied yourself elsewhere? I was listening to a song this week.

[24 : 01] And the song, Colin Hay, who you might remember from Men at Work, Down Under was their big hit. But as a solo artist, he's written a song and he talks about, I tried speaking to Jesus, but he put me on hold.

He says he's been swamped by calls this week and he couldn't shake his cold. I think some of us know how wrong that is, but in our experience, we kind of think that that's what's going on.

That God's too busy doing other things to be bothered with us. That cannot be the case. Discipline is not punishment. All the punishment the believer deserves was taken on Christ.

All of it. It says that he drained the cup of God's wrath. If you were to be able to see the cup of God's wrath and look in, you would see that it is empty for the believer.

There's nothing there. Which means it can't be God's anger at you. Because that's all gone. That's taken on Jesus. So whatever you're enduring, whatever opposition you're facing, whatever hardships, whatever losses, whatever griefs, whatever heartaches, whatever pains, whatever crises, if you are enduring those as a Christian, they are not punishment.

[25 : 23] They are the discipline that your Father in heaven, who loves you deeply, deems that you need in order to make you like his son and get you to glory.

In the same way that he hadn't forgotten Jesus in his trials, he hasn't forgotten you in yours. You might say, well, I don't like it.

You can say what you like, Reuben, but I don't like it. Why me? I want it to stop. I've had enough. In some cases that's natural.

I suppose none of us enjoy things that are hard or painful. But a world without friction means nothing can move forward. We need friction in order to move forward, in order to grow.

A world without burdens means no one gets stronger. If you don't have to carry anything, you're not going to get strong. So look at verse 5.

[26 : 31] As we run the race, we need to remember not to take discipline lightly. Don't despise it. Don't think it's a bad thing. Don't look down on it. That's the sense of lightly.

Because it is both how we grow and it's how we show that we are true sons of God. Always, always, always remember the Lord's discipline is a sign that you are his child.

And he is treating you like his son. And if we will receive that discipline in faith, look how things work out. Verse 11. For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.

You're telling me it does. But later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. When we receive trials from the Lord as his loving discipline, that is, if we receive them for our good.

Now, we wouldn't have chosen this state of affairs ourselves. But rather than resent it, we trust the Lord's providence in it all. It will cultivate in us the fruit of righteousness. It will grow in us the beautiful fruit of contentment and peace and faith that endures to the end of the race.

[27 : 52] Even when things are hard. Even when things are hard. Some of you are struggling for all kinds of reasons. For all kinds of reasons. We can struggle because we won't give up a particular sin.

That sin that clings so closely. If you profess to follow Christ, but you just love your sin too much to give it up. Well, the Lord loves you too much to let you find contentment in that sin.

And so, in your misery in that situation, you can go one of two ways. You can blame God that your Christian faith makes you unhappy and you can walk away.

Or receive it as his discipline. Repent of the sin and see it lead to that fruit of righteousness. Some of you are experiencing hardships and there's no direct connection to sin.

But the truth is, let's be honest, in that situation, there's still the same temptation. You can resent the fact that he hasn't given you the life that you want and harden yourself to him.

[28 : 51] Or you can receive these circumstances as the discipline of a father who loves you more than you could know. And who is wiser than you could ever be. And trust him.

That this, whatever it is in your life, is what you need in order that you could be trained in righteousness. The righteousness that befits one of his children who is on their way to glory and running the race marked out for them.

So, when we come into the arena with all of those who have gone ahead of us, they are cheering us on. This is how we run. Something to do. Get rid of that sin that slows you down.

Get rid of the hindrances. Live a life of deep, ongoing repentance. Somewhere to look. We look to Jesus who has paved the way ahead of us. And then something to remember.

Your trials have a purpose. Even when you can't see what that purpose is. They are the loving discipline of your heavenly father. And they are the thing that marks you out as one of his children.

[29 : 57] So friends, keep on. Keep on. Let's pray.