

**Introduction:** What should a believer who strives to live a life of faith expect?

**Hebrews 12:1-2:** *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,”<sup>2</sup> 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.”*

**A Life of Faith is Like a Long-Distance Race:** Comparing a life of faith to running a race is very apt. Depicting life as a race is one of Paul’s favorite metaphors as seen in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Galatians 5:7, 2 Timothy 4:7, and Philippians 2:16. No believer knows how long their race will be. The goal of a faith race is at the end of life to hear Christ say, *“well done good and faithful servant.”* In Revelation 2:10b Christ says, *“Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.”* Are we alone in our race of faith? No! A great cloud of witnesses who have already won their faith race are observers as the faithful continue their races.

The life of Christian faith is more like a marathon than a 100 yard dash. What is the proper way to prepare for a marathon, and what does it take to be able to finish one? You certainly have to be in good physical shape. That means constant attention and training. You must have a good mental attitude, which means understanding why you are running and what the reward is to be. Strong will power is necessary to be able to overcome obstacles encountered.

As the author says, it is necessary to eliminate anything that might hinder the running of a good race. A believers is to set their mind on the ultimate goal and single-mindedly run the race of faith with attention focused on things that truly matter. That is the picture the author wants us to apply to the race we are running. The way we use our time and resources should be based on what is needed to run and win the race.

**This is the Key Point of Hebrews:** The exhortation to “RUN” is the climatic point of the entire message of Hebrews. It is the point toward which the author has diligently worked. Endure, persevere, run, fight, be alert, be strengthened, don’t drift,

don't neglect, don't be sluggish and dull, and don't take anything for granted. Fight the fight of faith using every provision God has provided through the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is the key command in Hebrews. The remainder of Hebrews supports, explains, or provides motivation for this imperative to RUN the race of faith with perseverance! Don't stroll, don't meander, don't wander about aimlessly, and above all don't stop.

**Things that Hinder our Running:** Many different things can hinder running. Sin is always a hindrance. Even good things can be a problem if misused. If things become too important, become an obsession or addiction, that is a significant problem. Possession of things is not of itself evil. Many heroes of Chapter 11 were wealthy with vast possessions. The point is to avoid becoming overly dependent on things. John Piper points out that asking the right questions is vital. No one can fight the good fight of faith if they are always trying to decide what to do by asking "is this wrong" or "what's wrong with this?" The right question is "does this help or hinder my race of faith?" Does it help or hinder me to greater love, purity, courage, humility, patience, and self-control? We are designed to depend on Christ not on things.

**What is Right for One May be Wrong for Another:** Moses laid aside prerogatives of Egyptian royalty to pursue his God-given mission. We must likewise put aside anything that may hinder our faith. Even things consistent with Christian principles which are OK for other Christians may not be right for us just now. Joseph properly ruled in Egypt. Moses gave up royalty as a hindering weight.

There are many categories of hindering weights such as ambition, anxieties, hobbies, wealth, fame, or power. Each one who runs must honestly judge what might hinder their faith and willingly lay hinderances aside. Others may be unhindered by the things that hinder you.

**Dealing with Things that Hinder our Race of Faith:** When we face problems which hinder our race of faith, we are to look to Jesus, or as the NIV has it, to fix our eyes on Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith. In any race, where you focus your eyes is vitally important. We dare not let our focus wander. We must keep our spiritual eyes focused on our goal – Jesus. It is Jesus who laid the foundation of faith

in our hearts. He will ultimately bring our faith to completion. His ability to give us faith and bring it to completion is based on who He is and what He accomplished during His incarnation. He is willing to give us faith and bring it to completion. He is our brother in the family of God (2:11-12). Paul says in Philippians 1:6 ***“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*** Our race of faith is to be run “in Christ.”

We look to Jesus because he is *the founder and perfecter of our faith*. He gives faith and completes it. In His incarnation, Jesus successfully went before us in His faith race. He laid aside every weight, every tie of family and friends that hindered. He set his face against the sin of unbelief and daily lived in patient perseverance, trusting His Father to work everything out for Him. He set the perfect example. As Bruce says, "It was sheer faith in God, unsupported by any visible evidence, that carried Him through the taunting, the scourging, the crucifying, and the more bitter agony of rejection, desertion and dereliction" (1964:352).

But Jesus is more than an example. It is He who empowers all believers! Moment by moment, throughout life, believers find strength as they look to Him. Having himself lived by faith, he knows our stress and our needs. Ephesians 3:16: ***“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”*** Philippians 4:13, ***“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”***

**Sin Can Entangle:** It is unlikely anyone doubts the power of sin to entangle. Everyone sins every day, probably even in our dreams. To avoid being entangled by sin, believers need to intentionally deal biblically with sin on a regular basis. Failing that, the risk of entanglement is great. We should regularly examine ourselves, identify sins of commission and omission, repent and ask for forgiveness. Little sins if unattended can quickly become a host of sins that overwhelm us.

Sin can never be completely eliminated during a believer’s mortal life. That we know from both Scripture and personal experience. The task of eliminating sin will not be finished until we are glorified. We should biblically attend to sin anytime it is noticed. Don’t let it go unchallenged. Unconfessed, unrepented sin tends to multiply.

From what the author has written, *persistent unbelief* is a sin he sees as great danger. All habitual sin tends to lead to unbelief. No one can evade God's discipline or judgement for sin.

Galatians 6:7, ***“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”*** Unbelief can catch anyone almost unaware. Moses treated the details of God's word lightly on one occasion (Deuteronomy 32:51-52; Psalm 106:33), but that occasion kept him from physically entering the promised land. The right way is to confess, repent, be forgiven, and forsake sin as God enables.

**Believers Are Surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses:** The author assures believers they are by no means alone. Countless multitudes in the past have successfully kept the faith and are now with God in glory. They are described as ***“a great cloud of witnesses.”*** They have gone before us, leaving the example of their lives as a testimony to God's faithfulness. Our Lord Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, ran the race of faith perfectly. He paid the penalty for our sin and opened the way to the Father. He sends the Holy Spirit to indwell believers. He is our heavenly High Priest who represents us before the Father.

**Everyone Must Run Their Own Race But They Are Not Alone:** Every believer must run their own race. Each one has their own set of obstacles, their own track on which to run, and their own capabilities and limitations, but we do not run alone. We are in the midst of a crowd both of today's believers and believers of the past, and most importantly, Christ leads the way. Our race of faith does not consist of any single accomplishment or sudden burst of spiritual energy. It is a long-term effort. Keeping our spiritual eyes fixed on Jesus, we will be able to persevere and live a life of faithfulness to God. With our spiritual eyes fixed intently on Jesus, we steadily progress as we travel the road of sanctification.

**Hebrews 12:3-10:** ***“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. <sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> For the***

*Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”<sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.”*

**Consider Jesus to Avoid Growing Weary or Fainthearted:** Two vivid Greek words are used to speak of growing weary and faint of heart. They are words Aristotle used to describe an athlete who flings himself to the ground in collapse after he has surged past the finish line. In effect the author is telling us don't give up too soon. Don't collapse before the finish line is crossed. The author's first readers struggle was difficult, but it had not yet become a mortal struggle as it had for many in the Faith Hall of Fame. There is hope. Christ willingly suffered for us – what are we willing to do for Him?

**Discipline:** Believers are to be self-disciplined. Yet, there are times when every believer needs external discipline. The author says at times hardships are sent as discipline from God. Like a good father God disciplines when necessary. Proper discipline is an advantage not a disadvantage. It is a mark of love. We submit to our earthly father's discipline which is imposed when needed.

We owe our bodily life to our earthly father and we obey him. How much more should we submit to the discipline of God to whom we owe our immortal spirit and who, in His wisdom, seeks for nothing but our highest good. When our loving Father disciplines us, it is intended for our benefit, something to be respected and learned from. If we accept in our heart that all discipline from God has its source in His love for us, that it is a form of His grace to us, and is aimed at our ultimate good there will be no room for rebellious complaint, self-pity, and resentment.

**Hebrews 12:11-13:** *“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have*

*been trained by it.<sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,<sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.”*

**Reacting to Discipline:** No matter its source, discipline is unpleasant. If it were pleasant it would have little corrective power. God’s discipline is purifying in intent and aimed to meet our spiritual needs. After discipline we can ultimately look back on it and realize we gained peaceful fruit of righteousness from the experience. Exactly what the author means by the peaceful fruit of righteousness is not clear – but it may be a spiritual quality of peace experienced by a believer when it is clear all is right between the believer and God.

**Signs of Difficulty:** The next two verses resume the metaphor of running the faith race in response to the exhortation to live like Christ. When running, the position and motion of arms and legs is of great importance in maintaining proper body coordination and rhythm. If a runner begins to tire, fatigue usually shows up first in drooping arms and next in wobbling knees. Focusing on drooping arms or wobbling knees is a sure way to lose a race. The only hope is to focus on the goal of reaching the finish line. For the Christian that means focusing spiritual eyes on Jesus no matter how much our spiritual knees wobble and our arms droop. (See also Isaiah 35:1-4).

**Keep Your Eyes on Jesus:** Verse 13 appears based on Proverbs 4:25-27, *“Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.<sup>26</sup> Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.<sup>27</sup> Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.”* In the race of faith, do nothing to distract or cause wavering. Such things harm not only our race but may cause others to stumble as well. “Lame” appears to refer to people who have identified with the church but have not been born again. They waver between God and other attractions. Making straight paths for your feet appears to mean setting a good example for the “lame” – avoiding things that are a bad testimony and might cause an already limping unbeliever to be “put out of joint.” Instead, set a good example. It might be the impetus needed for them to come to Christ and be healed.

**Hebrews 12: 14-17:** *“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup> See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.”*

**Without Holiness No One Will See the Lord:** The proper response of believers to God’s dealings is to pursue peace and holiness, the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Yes, always promote peace but never attempting to do so at the expense of holiness.

Deuteronomy 29:18 refers to a root which bears bitter and poisonous fruit. The context is that of a man who goes after strange gods and encourages others to do the same. This is a warning against seeking unbiblical spiritual experiences.

Esau lived his life as a bad example of what God expects of a believer. He seemingly had no interest in God but was completely concerned with temporal and material matters. He showed little thought for spiritual values, preferring immediate satisfaction even over sacred rights. He sold his birthright for a meal, momentarily satisfying physical hunger, and then gone forever. Though Esau was later remorseful, he found no place of repentance.

**Hebrews 12:18-24:** *“For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” <sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” <sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to*

*Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

**A Warning to Heed God's Words:** This is the author's fifth and final warning. He urges his readers to think seriously about the vital importance of heeding God's words. He says look up at God to see your blessings. These Hebrew Christian converts were in an immeasurably better position than the believers of the Old Covenant. The spiritual privileges they gained from the New Covenant in the blood of Christ, are in direct contrast to the awesome lesson provided by the scene at Sinai where the Law was received by Moses. Their obvious gain should make them eager to comply fully with every word from God. Verses 18-21 echo the story of the Israelite experience at Mt. Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:11; Exodus 19:12, 13; Deuteronomy 5:23-27; 9:19).

The perspective is that the Mt. Sinai experience was terrifying. The Mt. Zion experience is glorious. Three things are stressed about the Mt. Sinai story: (1) God's sheer majesty and power were demonstrated at Sinai with no hint of love. (2) God at Sinai was unapproachable. Except for Moses, those who try to approach God met death. (3) God at Sinai is terrifying. The people are awe-struck with fear, afraid to look or even listen. Verses 18-21 deals with the Old Covenant relationship in which God is depicted in lonely majesty, separated from mankind. Mankind is depicted as in abject fear of God. Even Moses trembled with fear. The contrast between Old and New begins at verse 22 with comments on the New Covenant relationship to God.

**The Glories of the New Covenant:** The author says consider the glories of the New Covenant: (1.) Unlike earthly Jerusalem, all of heavenly Jerusalem is the City of the Living God. This world is impermanent, full of fears and tears, full of mysteries and separations. That world of impermanence is replaced by the heavenly world of permanence and love. (2.) In heavenly Jerusalem, angels are in joyful assembly. (3.) There, the spiritual first-born are enrolled in heaven. (4.) God is the unavoidable Judge. Every believer must ultimately experience God's scrutiny. Though awe and fear of God remain, there is overwhelming glory. (5.) Jesus, who brought about the New Covenant by His perfect sacrifice, made possible a new relationship between



believers and God. Jesus, the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice, made approachable the unapproachable God of Sinai. At the cost of Jesus suffering and death on the cross, all believers have immediate access to God the Father. When Abel was slain, his blood called for vengeance (Genesis 4:10). When Jesus was slain, His blood opened the way of reconciliation with the Father. Jesus sacrifice made it possible for mankind to be friends with God.

**Hebrews 12:25-29**: *See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. <sup>26</sup> At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” <sup>27</sup> This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. <sup>28</sup> Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup> for our God is a consuming fire.”*

**A Warning**: Verse 25 begins a contrast. Moses received the oracles of God, but he was not their author. He received the words of God, but he did not have any input on their content. Yet, anyone broking those commandments was punished. On the other hand, Jesus speaks directly for God. If a person merits condemnation for violating the indirect message of the law, how much more does he merit punishment for neglecting the direct perfect message of Jesus’ gospel? The gospel is the full revelation of God. Because of that, a person who hears the gospel carries a double and a terrible responsibility. Their condemnation will be all the greater if they neglect what they hear.

**The Unshakable Kingdom of God**: The author draws out still another thought. When the law was given, the earth was shaken. God says He will once more shake not the earth, and not only the earth but also the heavens. In that day everything that can be shaken will be destroyed. The only things to remain will be the things which can never be shaken. What can endure God’s shaking and remain unshaken? Chief among the unshaken is a believer’s relationship with God through Christ. Believer,

keep your eyes on your unshakable relationship with God. Indeed, look ahead to the unshakeable kingdom of God.

All physical things may pass away; the world as we know it will be uprooted; life as we now experience it will come to an end; but one thing stands eternally sure – our relationship to God is forever.

Our great obligation is to worship God with reverence and serve Him with fear (recognition of His awesomeness). Our relationship with God will be our salvation when the world passes away.

There is a choice before us. Remain true to Christ and all will be well. Be false to Him and God in **His** wrath will be to us a consuming fire of destruction. If a man be true to God, he gains everything. If he is untrue to God, he loses everything. Loyalty to God is the key to everything both in time and eternity.

**How God Sees Believers:** Be thankful that when God looks at believers, He chooses to see them through the perfection of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He sees Christ's "perfections" rather than believer's shortcomings and sinful nature. In the end, standing before Christ in heaven, by God's grace, believers will be glorified as a likeness of Christ. Believers will be like Him, glorified, entirely true to the Father, entirely without sin.

**What is Next?** Our study of Hebrews ends with the author's closing comments from chapter 13.