

Running the Race

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[0 : 00] Turn to Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 to 13. It reads, Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,! let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,! and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son?

It says, My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.

And your hardship as discipline, God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined, and everyone undergoes discipline, then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.

[1 : 21] Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of Spirits and live?

They disciplined us for a little while, as they thought best. But God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray and ask for God's help.

Our Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for this morning. We give you thanks that, though it was pouring outside just a moment ago, so many showed up to worship you. And it's only right that we worship you, that we worship you in spirit, that we worship you in truth, that we worship you through song, through prayer, and now also through your word.

[2 : 35] We pray, Lord, that your Holy Spirit would open the word for us today, that you would be right here, and that we would become more and more like your Son, Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we pray.

Amen. Amen. So we're looking at the book of Hebrews today. Hebrews is a bit of a mystery to us, in that we don't know who wrote it, and we don't exactly know into what context it was written.

However, because it has a pastoral heart, for lack of better terminology, this book is actually often called a sermon, and the author is called a pastor.

And this comes through, really, as you read the book, in many, many places. But if I had to summarize the book, just to give you sort of a flavor of the whole thing, as we focus in on just a little bit, it would be something along the lines of, the author wants to encourage the persecuted and weary people of God to continue their journey in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, their pioneer, their high priest, and their God.

Now, our focus today is just on a small portion of the pastor attempting to persuade his people to not give up. Weary, struggling people of God.

[3 : 58] So let's look at Hebrews chapter 12, verses 1 to 13, a bit closer. And as we do so, and you won't believe this, but I have three points for you today.

Three points. And for these points, I'm actually grateful to the late Timothy Keller for his structure here, which I thought just wonderfully summed up the passage. But what I want us to see today is first of all that you're in a race.

I want you to see that you're in a race. I want you to see the nature of that race. And then finally, I want you to know how to run that race. So let's read verses 1 and 2 again.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. As I've mentioned, the first thing I want you to notice is that if you're a Christian today, if you believe in the resurrected Son of God for the forgiveness of sins, well, then you're in a race.

[5 : 14] And I hope that the first emotion that comes with that thought is actually relief. Because I think that the idea of a race, of life as a race, gives voice to what is possibly one of the most common of human experiences, which is simply that life is hard, and the Christian life, sometimes, somehow, doubly so.

Now, we're not often in shock when somebody tells us that a race is hard. For instance, the two oceans, because races are hard. Or, so I'm told, I think the closest I've come to the two oceans is asking Sean Robson about it.

But races, by definition, are the very opposite of a walk in the park. We expect them to be difficult. We expect them to be grueling, to ask for every ounce of our determination to get to the finish line. And yet we're often surprised when our life gets hard, especially our Christian life. And from what I've observed, our hardship often has two, what I call two movements.

The first movement is the shock of the situation. It's a blown tire on the N2 at night. It's a failed exam. It's the fallout from recurring sin.

[6 : 33] It's a loved one coming sick with cancer. These are hard situations that can often feel like a blow to the gut.

But that first movement is then followed closely by a second movement. And that second movement is the sheer surprise that we're the ones to suffer.

It's the shock of our self-security, our sense of security, actually, that is shattered at that moment. I mean, picture the scene. You're on the N2. This is the first movement. You're on the N2, and your car breaks down.

What happens? Well, that's the first shock, right? Oh, no. Disaster. The second movement. I'm not nearly as safe as I thought I was. Those two things go hand in hand.

But somehow, again and again, it knocks the wind right out of us when it happens to us. Because we're in disbelief. You're in disbelief that would happen to you.

[7 : 34] C.S. Lewis famously wrote on hardship being a megaphone for suffering. He wrote that early on in his life, or earlier. Until suffering visited him through the death of his wife.

In a grief observed, he later wrote this. If I had really cared as I thought I did about the sorrows of the world, now listen to this part, I should not have been so overwhelmed when my own sorrows came.

I thought I trusted the rope until it mattered to me whether it would bear my weight. Now it matters, and I find I didn't.

At the time when he really needed to trust, at the time where he needed the Lord, he realized in disbelief just how surprised he was and that he didn't trust the rope.

You and me, if we're honest, we expect security. We expect control. And when they are shattered, when your expectations really are shattered, not just the security, but the expectations they have, then this can thump you to the ground.

[8 : 49] And I think this is the first point the pastor wants us to see here is that you can avoid at least some of it, definitely not all of it, but at least some of it by adjusting your expectations.

There are many times when you can't do much about the situation that you're in, but you are in control of your expectations. And much like the runner expects hardship along the way, especially on that uphill, which I think they call mountains in a run.

So we can expect difficulty. We can expect difficulty in this life. And also as a Christian, Christian life can be hard.

It's a lot. Reading our Bibles, praying, meeting with other Christians for encouragement, fighting temptation, putting sin to death, counting ourselves dead to sin and alive to Christ, and that multiple times a day, reminding ourselves of the reality of Christ's redemptive work, these are hard and often tiring things.

But don't be surprised by the struggle. These things can be weary. It's really giving up that you need to avoid at all costs.

[10:02] But I'll say more on that later. For now, I want you to notice one encouragement from the passage right off the bat. It's that you're not alone in this race.

In a city like Cape Town, I believe some of you are very familiar with the feeling of what it means to be alone, maybe even lonely. And I think in a world where doom scrolling exists, I'm surprised that anyone feels like they're connected.

But the reality is, and this is what you need to remind yourself of, is that you're not alone, nor are you the first in the journey. The passage that's right in front of the one or before the one that we just read, Hebrews 11, is a long list of heroes of the faith who ran the race before you and who finished it.

That's the important bit. They finished it. They were witnesses to the race and all its hardships and they were definitely no strangers to suffering and to persecution.

And yet, they persevered. I remember sitting in the house of Corrie ten Boom in the Netherlands a few years ago. Her house is maintained as a sort of museum to this day.

[11:16] And I was struck by how this heroic lady, I mean she had smuggled or hidden Jews in her house from the Nazis, how honest she was later in life about her fears, about her struggles, about her doubts.

And not just in private, but she actually wrote them, like as in, you can read her book, and she was honest about them. They were real. And yet, she persevered.

She held on. So much so that even Namibians these days are encouraged when we hear of what she has done and how the Lord used her faithfulness.

Your weariness and your trial along the way doesn't surprise anybody. It might surprise you right now, but it shouldn't.

It's a race after all and races can be hard. So that was the first point. You're in a race. Let's look, let's consider the second one.

[12:25] The nature of the race. This is what's described in verses 4 into 13. I've called this the nature of the race because I think the pastor wants us to understand, at least in part, why there's so much hardship along the way.

For this, the pastor shifts gears. He moves away from the athletic imagery and he now considers a father-son relationship. And he makes the startling point and it's this.

Endure hardship as the father's discipline. To this, I immediately had two questions. What kind of hardship is in view here? And is all hardship the Lord's discipline?

Now, according to the text and I'll summarize here and not just in chapter 12 but also before that, the hardship in the text is the hardship experienced by all people, by all God's people in particular because this world is broken by sin.

Your sin, my sin, our nation's sin, all the sin that goes all the way back to Adam has wrought havoc in this world, has caused suffering in this world, and we're still dealing with the aftermath of it.

[13:37] And as Christians in particular, persecution can play a role as well as part of that suffering. So again, really all kinds of suffering as they are produced by sin are envisioned in this text.

Is all suffering then God's discipline in your life? To answer that, we need to consider the riveting subject of genre in literature for a moment.

If I didn't have your attention yet, I think I have it now. Notice that in verses five and six, the author's quoting Proverbs, Proverbs chapter three verses 11 and 12.

And he's quoting from what is known as wisdom literature. Wisdom literature is found sort of in the middle of your Bibles, your Psalms, your Proverbs. Proverbs. And the takeaway point here is that when you're reading the Proverbs, you're not to take every claim that you read as an absolute truth claim.

Instead, and I'm paraphrasing a theologian here, a proverb is a single component of truth that must be brought together with other elements. It's almost like a puzzle piece that you're putting together

to obtain a full picture of reality.

[14:51] Put simply, a proverb never says everything there is to say about a subject. But it can say a lot. Similarly, here, though not all suffering is God's discipline, much of it may be.

So the pastor of Hebrews applies that wisdom from the Old Testament to the situation of the people by the New Testament times. And he says, consider your hardship as discipline.

For us today, that means you might be suffering right now as a consequence of sin and persecution. But know that you're under the care of a loving Father who is actively at work in your life.

One thing I want to caution you of, though, is the pastor doesn't actually refer to any particular sin. He doesn't say which specific sin might be causing or might bring about the discipline of God.

And so I want to caution you against forming causative relationships between a sin which might have caused suffering, or in other words, God's discipline. to illustrate this.

[16:15] When the diesel prices go up and you experience the pinch financially, he's not encouraging you to try and figure out what sin might have caused this in your life. You can't know if the greedy glance at the lottery numbers yesterday is the reason for your violent attack of gastro today.

There's just no way of knowing that. Similarly, that biting comment, that slammed door yesterday, well, you can't know if that had a role to play in you being retrenched today.

The world is way, way too complex and your understanding way, way too small to draw those kind of lines between particular sins and particular suffering.

And yet we, we do it often anyway, don't we? When we sin and we feel really bad and then afterwards we get a sore stomach or whatever it might be, then we go, oh yeah, that's probably it. It's reminding. Why do we do that? Well, I think we look for causative relationships because we hope that the knowledge itself will bring a form of comfort.

[17:28] It will help us do something. It will help us reassert control over the situation. Because that's the very first thing that suffering takes from us, doesn't it? It takes from us the sense of control that we had.

It exposes that we were never in control to begin with. And so now if only I can figure out what caused this, well then I can rectify it and then I'm back in the driver's seat. So ultimately, what I would encourage you here is, with here, is that ultimately asking the question of whether a specific sin is the discipline of God or not is usually, or at the very least, often the wrong question.

The right question is, how are you responding to your suffering? Are you enduring it? Trusting that with everything you're facing, God is in the driver's seat.

He's fully in control. Because you see, there are other ways that you can respond, other ways other than trust. And the passage has two of them for us. In verse five, it says you can either make light of the Lord's discipline or you can lose heart.

Now what does it mean to make light of the Lord's discipline? You can run from it. You can brush it off, pretend like it doesn't exist. The famous poem, *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley, I think Stephen might have brought it up in the past as well, but is a good example, I think, of this attitude.

[19:01] From childhood, William Henley was, well, he suffered from tubercular arthritis, a severe chronic condition that caused him immense pain and meant he had a leg amputation in his early 20s.

So this was a man who knew suffering. He spent long stretches in hospitals, often undergoing painful treatments at the hand of doctors who could not guarantee a high chance of success.

So he wrote a poem in the middle of that time and the most famous lines you might have heard before and I'm just going to read the one line. It says, I'm the master of my fate, I'm the captain of my soul.

His lines really embody sort of this Victorian ideal of stoicism, this self-discipline, this moral strength. He might not have been able to do much about his situation, but man, he will remain in charge come what may.

Now I think we can deduce at least from that poem that at that point Henry wasn't Christian, but I think it's the definition of what it means to scorn suffering. And for Christians, this would be the definition of what it means to make light of the Lord's discipline.

[20:16] Instead of turning to the sovereign Lord in humility when life gets hard, fully expecting his love and his assurance and his help, we turn inward. And we rely more on ourselves.

We grit our teeth and suffering really becomes a tool for you and me to become harder and more self-sufficient. Now according to the text, that's the one response.

The other response is that you can do it hard. You can give up. You can give in to self-pity and to despair. However, and I want to be gentle here, but do you realize that despair is ultimately profound idolatry?

Think about it with me. When you despair, you're so convinced of your own knowledge of the situation that when you think there is no point to the suffering, well then you can conclude there isn't any.

that sounds a lot like the knowledge of God to me. It's almost, almost omniscient. You have to know everything there is to know in order to make that kind of judgment and then to decide, well great, I can now despair.

[21 : 38] So even though often despair has a guise of helplessness and innocence to it, it is anything but. I can quote C.S. Lewis here, but he wrote, despair is a greater sin than any of the sins which provoke it.

Sort of the back end of many other sins comes despair and it is one of the greatest forms of saying I am like God. So despair in your suffering does not honor God.

Now the pastor, to both of these groups, to those who defiantly run away from the Lord and instead turn inward and to those who want to give up, he says this word of encouragement.

He says, consider enduring your suffering a submission to a loving father. Let me illustrate what that might look like.

Recently, and Connor asked me yesterday if our new puppy would make an appearance and yes it will right here. Recently Karen and I, we adopted a dog, a little dog from tears.

[22 : 52] She is a mixed breed and has an excitement for life. When we brought her home, we named her Bailey, signed her up for puppy school, bought her all the treats and then, as probably many good dog owners do, we eagerly expected nothing short of a perfect little dog under our excellent care.

Let me tell you, we snapped out of that daydream because our days are filled with running after a teething, growing, pooping, snapping little land shark who boy or boy has her own mind.

Now we've learned that when she gets what the puppy school people call overstimulated, I have another word for it, it's much closer to crazy, but if she's overstimulated, we need to help her regulate, we need to help her calm down.

And so for this, we put her into a crate, we give her a nice chewy and then we close the door. The first few times we did this, you could have sworn we were trying to burn her at the stake.

she was wailing, she was inconsolable, she was crying, she was barking, she was losing her little mind until we eventually let her out. But then something wonderful happened.

[24 : 15] With time, that changed. She would go into her crate, she would still cry a little bit, she still didn't love her situation, but then she would stop and she would find her chewy and she would just fall asleep.

With time, she had built a trust in us that this too would pass. There was a sense of security in the home that we had provided her and even though she didn't understand, she accepted it and she no longer gave in to despair.

Now I think her response, both the initial, still, you know, whining and crying, there might still be a little bit of hardship at the beginning, but then followed by calm acceptance of her new circumstance, of her life now as it is, was actually in keeping with the reality of the situation.

That is, yes, there is hardship, but ultimately, she's okay. The same dynamic I put before you today, and it's, I think, the one that the past encourages you to see in this text, a loving father is allowing all kinds of hardship to come your way as a consequence broadly of sin.

And much like Bailey, you do not understand why this is happening to you, and you might be frustrated, and you might be angry, and you might be weary. And it's okay to feel those things.

[25 : 45] Just don't live in those emotions endlessly. Instead, remember that you're under the care of the loving father. The same God who holds the universe in his hand, who has numbered the hair on your head, is using whatever hardship has come into your life for your good.

Now, this is obviously not everything there is to say about hardship, and Hebrews doesn't make that claim either. But for the race that you're in, that we spoke of just a moment ago, for the race that's before you, it's vital that you trust that the loving father's hand is intimately involved.

And no one had to trust that hand more than our Lord Jesus. This brings us to our third point, how to run the race. For this practical section, I have three comments for you, two things to do, and one truth to abide in.

The first thing to do, I really was wordsmithing at this point in my preparation, the first thing to do is to throw off all that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

Take distractions and obstacles to your faith seriously. Sin in your life? Even more so. The desired outcome here in Hebrews, if you read chapter 10 and 11, you'll see is that you're running toward holiness, to share in God's righteousness.

[27 : 19] So throw off everything that's not. Those petty sins that you hold on to, they're just not worth it. The second comment on how to run the race is one that I've made before now, or at the very least implicitly, but is worthwhile repeating on its own.

You must run with perseverance. If you're weary, if you're tired, remember that no runner feels strongest on the last uphill of a marathon.

Of course you're tired, but giving up now on that final hill puts the entire exercise of running the marathon before it into question, especially when the finish line is closed.

Every year on the Easter weekend, you can buy tickets to see Handel's Messiah right here in Cape Town. Handel's Messiah is, and I had to read this up how to define this, but it's an oratorio, which is sort of a vocal musical drama with a choir, with an orchestra, soloists, the whole lot.

And it's fully on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And this piece is performed not just in Cape Town, but the world over.

[28 : 38] And it stems from a man called George Frederick Handel, who produced this in September of 1741. Now just a few months before that, in the spring of 1741, the self-same George Frederick Handel had been a broken man.

A biographer described his state like this. When the spring of 1741 came, Handel was broken. London had successfully buried him. His health was beating him down.

He never slept. He was shunned in the street. To London, he was dead. He was also heavily indebted and faced the real risk of going to debtors' prison.

him. So for all intents and purposes, this man was finished. And I think everyone would have understood if he had just given up. And yet he didn't.

By September of that same year, in a period of only 24 days, he wrote the Messiah. and the world is blessed to have it to this very day.

[29 : 49] Thousands and thousands of Christians and non-Christians listen to the gospel every year when they go to see Handel's Messiah. You never know what the other side of the hill might look like that you're facing right now.

Just keep running. And finally, and really most importantly, look to Jesus as you do so. Here's where you find the fuel for the race.

For everything that we've just talked about, all of that is relying on self. If you don't look to Jesus for the fuel for this race. Fix your eyes on him as you run because he's run the race before you.

Nothing he asks of you, he hasn't already done. Nothing he asks of you, he's not given you the resources for to endure.

Because he's given himself for you. Perfect and son though he was, he too ran the race. The holy, perfect son of God gave himself to a race marked by suffering and death, even death on a cross.

[31 : 02] Why did he endure that? Well, verse 2 tells us in Hebrews chapter 12. It says, for the joy set before him. What was Christ looking forward to so much that he would endure suffering, that he would endure hardship, that he would endure death on a cross?

Other parts of Hebrews tell us, I think, allude to it at least, especially chapter 2. But think about it with me for a moment. What was the one thing in eternity past, before the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, what was the one thing that God the Father, God the Spirit, and God the Son were without?

What's the one thing that wasn't present? You. And me. The Son ran the race, his eyes fixed on the prize of bringing you and me home.

And as the checkered flag fell, he was crushed, so that you can submit to the Father and live. Christ died so that you might have life.

And now Hebrews tells us he's seated at the right hand of the throne of God, showing us another wonderful truth. Suffering is always momentary, but his reign is forever.

[32 : 31] So weary Christian, keep the faith. There's so much comfort and strength right here for your race. keep going. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we stand in awe of what the Son has wrought for us. And as we stand in awe, we also stand well as hurting, hurting Christians, hurting people of God, hurting in this world where so much is wrong.

Lord, help us to keep looking to the Son. Help us to keep looking to Him who has gone before us and who is now giving us everything we need to keep going.

Heavenly Father, your Son was broken. Your Son took on Him our sin so that we might be free of ours and run. We can run without hindrance.

Help us with this, we pray, right here, right now, today. We pray for your help, for your endurance, for your encouragement.

[33 : 47] Be gracious to us, our Lord, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.