

Say What?

Running with Jesus:
Hebrews 12:1-2

Intro

One of the most frequent images to describe the Christian life in the New Testament is that of a race. Like a marathon, the Christian life is a difficult journey that requires endurance, patience, and the strength to push through painful times. The writer of Hebrews begins chapter 12 by showing Christians how we can run our race to the fullest. In order to fully appreciate this passage, it's helpful to understand some of its background.

Background for Hebrews 12

The main clause of Hebrews 12:1-2a is translated "let us run." This image of "running" emphasizes that Jesus' followers have a course to complete or a goal to reach, and must exert effort if the Christian life is to be lived faithfully. The author has in view a marathon rather than a sprint, as seen in the phrase "with endurance." The effort called for, consequently, is a sustained effort that goes the distance, following through on one's commitment with dogged determination. This is how we must run "the race marked out for us."

The picture evoked in 12:1 is that of runners looking down the track at the course they must run. They know where they must go and now must bring their training and commitment to bear on the task of running the race successfully. As runners see the path lying before them, so Christians see the path of the life of following Jesus stretch into the future.

Yet, thankfully, the path is not all the believer sees. We are called to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (12:2). Looking to a king or leader as a model, or to God for inspiration, was a common motif in ancient literature. In the context of the "race," Jesus is the one who has run the path before us, and he offers the preeminent example of how the race is to be run. But he is more; that he is the "author and perfecter of our faith" sets him apart from all the examples of faith enumerated in Hebrews 11 (George Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*, Zondervan, 398).



Digging
Deeper

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*"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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."
Hebrews 12:1-2*

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Christians are called to participate in an “athletic contest,” and to do all that is necessary in order to complete the event. The metaphor of running a race is taken from the stadium, and reflects the recognized preeminence of the footrace in the Greek games. The footrace was one of the five contests of the pentathlon in the ancient games and always came first. At the Olympic Games the footrace was the only athletic contest for an extended period. The exhortation to run “with endurance,” identifies the race not as a contest of speed but of stamina. The allusion is to a distance race requiring disciplined commitment and endurance (William Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13*, Thomas Nelson, 408-409).

The writer tells us to, “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” The phrase recalls the usual preparation of stripping for a race. Contestants sometimes removed all of their clothing before running so that nothing could impede them during the race. “Everything that hinders” refers most naturally to the weight of a long heavy robe, which would hamper running. It may also apply to excess body weight. The writer does not have in view any particular sins which entangle us, but any encumbrance that would handicap a runner, and by analogy anything that would interfere with our commitment to Jesus Christ. This might have reference to love of wealth, attachment to the world, preoccupation with earthly interests, or self-importance. Christians are to divest themselves of every association or concern that would limit their freedom for Christian confession (Lane, 409).

The Cloud of Witnesses

The striking visual metaphor of a “cloud” of witnesses surrounding the runners further emphasizes the solidarity of the Christian with God's faithful people through the ages. They are “witnesses” because their lives (and in some cases their deaths) witnessed to the unconquerable faith in God for which they were “commended,” but they are also, as those who trusted God and whose faith has been vindicated, witnesses to the reliability of God's promises. Moreover, the presence of these “witnesses” means that to fail to complete the race would be not just a personal disappointment but a public disgrace (R. T. France, “Hebrews” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 168).

The writer calls for a display of endurance through faith. The admonition to run the prescribed race “with endurance” makes explicit the element of struggle that is integral to mature commitment. There must be firm resolve not to drop out of the contest but to exert every effort to cross the finish line despite hardship, exhaustion, and pain. The audience is summoned to an intense perseverance in faith in view of the example of those who have preceded them. Their unwavering faithfulness should encourage and inspire Christians to emulate them, enduring trials similar to their own. Because the race has been prescribed for us, we can be assured that it will bring us to the desired goal (Lane, 410).

The point of calling all these saints from chapter 11 “witnesses” isn't just to say that they are watching us, but to say that they are near enough for us to watch them while we run. We are running the race and we look out into the crowd and realize that every one of them finished the race, and we feel, “It can be done. It can be done.”

We look and we see examples of faith and perseverance under every imaginable circumstance: there's David who committed adultery and murder, and he finished; there's John the Baptist who had a weird personality, and he finished; there's John Mark the quitter, and he

finished; and Mary the prostitute, and she finished; and Job who suffered so much, and he finished; and Stephen who was hated and stoned, and he finished; and St. Paul who served as a single person all his life, and he finished. And the power and the faith that got them to the finish line works in us too (John Piper, "Looking Back to Witnesses, Up to Jesus, and Forward to Joy", found at <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary>).

Focusing on Jesus

Not only is Jesus the pioneer of faith; in Him faith has reached its perfection. The whole life of Jesus was characterized by unbroken and unquestioning faith in His heavenly Father, and never more so than when in Gethsemane He committed Himself to His Father's hands for the ordeal of the cross with the words: "not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). It was sheer faith in God, unsupported by any visible or tangible evidence, that carried Him through the taunting, the scourging, the crucifying, and the more bitter agony of rejection, desertion, and dereliction. "Come down from the cross, and we will believe," they said. Had He come down, by some gesture of supernatural power, He would never have been hailed as the "perfecter of faith" nor would He have left any practical example for others to follow.

To die by crucifixion was to reach the lowest depths of disgrace. It was a punishment reserved for those who were deemed of all men most unfit to live, a punishment for sub-humans. From so degrading a death Roman citizens were exempt by ancient law. The dignity of the Roman name would be besmirched by being brought into association with anything so vile as the cross. For slaves, and criminals of low degree, it was regarded as a suitable means of execution, and a grim deterrent to others. But this disgrace Jesus disregarded, as something not worthy to be taken into account when it was a question of His obedience to the will of God. So He brought faith to perfection by His endurance of the cross- and now the place of highest exaltation is His. The pioneer of salvation has been made perfect through sufferings, and has therefore taken His seat "at the right hand of the throne of God." His exaltation there, with all that it means for His people's wellbeing and for the triumph of God's purpose in the universe, is "the joy that was set before him," for the sake of which He submitted to shame and death (F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, 352-353).

The word translated "author" is rich with meaning and can communicate variously the idea of a champion, leader, forerunner, or initiator. The word has already been used in Hebrews in the context of Christ's bringing of salvation (2:10). These various nuances may overlap in this passage. Both the concepts of *forerunner* and *champion* fit the athletic imagery of the passage. Combined with the word translated "perfecter," however, it also may connote the idea of *initiator*. That he perfected our faith means that the Lord accomplished fully what it would take to save us. Ultimately, Jesus accomplished the perfection of our faith by his sacrificial death on the cross. In keeping with the race imagery, he has cleared the path of faith so that we may run it. The way is open, and although hurdles exist, the roadblocks have been removed (Guthrie, 399).

Final Thoughts

Like ancient (and modern) distance runners had to remove anything that made running difficult, so Christians are instructed to get rid of the things that pull us away from God. Sometimes these are sinful things. But other times these are things that just take too much of our attention. In order to persevere, we need to keep our focus on Jesus. He is the one who has enabled us to race, having provided for our salvation. And he is the perfect model for how to run.

Home Group Questions

1. What makes a marathon a helpful way to think about the Christian life?
2. What kinds of hurdles get in the way of following Jesus? (Think especially about the things that are not sinful in themselves.)
3. How does Jesus' faithfulness to God serve as an example to us? In what way was Jesus' race unique?
4. How can we prepare ourselves to persevere in our race? Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.
5. Read 2 Timothy 4:7. If you were at the end of your life, what would your life look like so that you would know this statement was true of you?
6. What are some of the rewards for running your race well?

Personal Application

7. Spend some time in the next couple weeks figuring out what things in your life are holding back your pursuit of God. Write them down and ask God to help you overcome these obstacles.