

# HEBREWS

Hebrews 12:1-17

## Introduction

The annual Western States Endurance Run is coming up. The race begins at 5:00am on Saturday of the last weekend in June. Runners must reach the finish line no later than 11:00am the following day in order to be eligible for an award. Participants run one hundred miles in one day. The run is conducted along the Western States Trail starting at Squaw Valley and ending in Auburn. The trail ascends from the Squaw Valley floor, an elevation 6,200 feet, to Emigrant Pass, an elevation 8,750 feet. It is a climb of 2,550 vertical feet in the first 4½ miles. From the pass runners travel west, climbing another 15,540 feet and descending 22,970 feet before reaching Auburn. Most of the trail passes through remote and rugged territory, accessible only to hikers, horses and helicopters.

In Hebrews twelve your Christian experience is compared to a run. I've heard it said that your spiritual run is not a sprint but rather it is a marathon. Well, it's not even a marathon; *it's an endurance run!* It doesn't last just one day; every day of your Christian life, from the moment of your conversion until the coming of your Lord, **you are running in a spiritual endurance race.**

"Endurance" describes the quality you require in order to finish your run. These verses describe where and how you acquire the endurance you require. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Discipline Yourself In Order To Run Your Race With Endurance, and #2 You're Disciplined By God In Order To Endure The Race You Run.

#1 You Discipline Yourself  
In Order To Run Your Race With Endurance  
(v1-4)

Adequate physical and mental preparation is of the utmost important to endurance running. Your spiritual run is no exception. Your **self-discipline** is the theme of the first four verses.

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

The word for "race" is from the Greek word *agone*. It means a contest, especially a race; but it is also transliterated into English as our word *agony*. The phrase, "run... the race" is in a verb tense that means *keep on running*. You're being encouraged to "*Keep on running the agony!*" It calls to mind those pictures of runners who are being cheered along the course to encourage them to dig deep and make it to the finish line.

Please note the phrase, "the race that is set before us." Runners do not set their own course; it is determined beforehand. **Your** course is determined by the Lord for your good and His glory.

The "great... cloud of witnesses" refers to all the believers who have gone before you, like those in chapter eleven, who have finished their run. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are spectators watching you run; it does mean that their running is a witness to you that believers can run their race with endurance.

The self-discipline a Christian requires in order to acquire endurance begins with "**laying aside**" two things: "every weight" and "the sin which so easily ensnares us."

You wouldn't think of participating in a running event wearing street clothes! It would be a weight that would hinder your progress. In your Christian run, a "weight" is not something that in and of itself is bad or wrong; it is anything that might hinder your progress. One author boldly proclaims, "Anything that does not help, hinders."

The word "weight" literally translates, *a swelling, superfluous flesh*. It is my observation that over the last twenty years conservative Christians like ourselves have become much more liberal with regards to their personal habits. We have added to our lives things that twenty years ago were considered vices and, therefore, hindrances to spiritual progress. We now call some of these vices "liberties," even though they both encumber us and are a stumblingblock to others. All I can say - to myself first, then to you - is that **anything** that does not help you is hindering you.

"The sin which so easily besets" might be a reference to the particular sin of unbelief. It is probably, though, a reference to *any* and *all* sinful attitudes and activities.

You are to "lay aside" any weights and all sin. You don't need to be told how because it is so obvious. You are to discipline yourself.

There's something else you do to acquire endurance - "**look to Jesus**":

Hebrews 12:2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:3 For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

Looking unto Jesus you see two things: His *enabling* and His *example*.

You see His **enabling** in the words "the author and finisher of our faith." As the "author... of our faith" Jesus saved you. The Bible calls it justification. As the "finisher of our faith" Jesus will complete the work He has begun in you. The Bible calls it glorification. You are being promised that Jesus - who has determined your particular run - will also enable you along the way.

You also have the **example** of Jesus. The word "consider" in verse three is the Greek word we translate into English as *analogy*. You are to see the life of Jesus as an analogy. You are to draw a comparison between His earthly life as a man and your own earthly life. When you do you will have examples of spiritual endurance that encourage you to endure.

For example: He "endured the Cross." Jesus knew that His death on the Cross was the run God had determined for Him. In and of itself a death on the Cross was something to be "despised" and "ashamed" of. But for Jesus it would result in the "joy set before Him" of being raised from the dead and exalted to "the right hand of the throne of God."

Jesus told **you** to pick up *your* cross and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). The course of your life - **your run** - will involve cross-like mental and physical agonies. You are to learn from the example of Jesus to look beyond them to the joy of being exalted "to the right hand of the throne of God." You are to fix your gaze on the finish line.

Jesus "endured hostility from sinners against Himself." "Hostility" is a summary of **all** the trials and troubles leading up to the Cross. Jesus endured them all as a man filled with and led by the Holy Spirit. You, too, can be filled with and led by the Holy Spirit. You have in Jesus' life as a man **all** the examples you need in order to discipline yourself to endure.

You have all the *enabling* and all the *examples* you need. ***The problem is we don't always look unto Jesus!*** We look everywhere else first. Then, when all else fails, we look to Jesus but want our distress to *end* rather than disciplining ourselves to *endure*.

The Hebrew Christians were being persecuted. They wanted it to end; they were being told to endure.

Hebrews 12:4 You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

Martyrdom is always a possibility for Christians. The recipients of this letter were still alive. They needed to adopt a more mature attitude about their suffering.

Self-discipline in your Christian run conjures up images of legalistic rules and regulations. *Nothing could be farther from the truth!* Participants in the Western States Endurance Run discipline themselves **because they enjoy the run**. You practice self-discipline for the joy of the prize! With the apostle Paul you proclaim, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14).

#2 You're Disciplined By God  
In Order To Endure The Race You Run  
(v5-17)

The writer expands the metaphor of the run. God knows already the course He has determined for you. He thus allows certain circumstances to prepare you to endure the *obstacles* or *opportunities* that are coming your way.

You might say that God is your personal trainer for the run. But there's a twist: God is first and foremost your Father and His personal training can also be likened to a father's training of his children.

Hebrews 12:5 And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "*My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;*  
Hebrews 12:6 *For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.*"

The quote is from Proverbs 3:11-12. "Chastening" means *correction, instruction, and nurturing*. "Scourges" means you get a *whipping*. These words represent the two aspects of successful child-training. We can call it **discipline** as long as we understand it encompasses everything that goes into child-training and not just punishment.

A good earthly father considers how to best prepare his children for the obstacles and opportunities they will encounter along the run of their life. God already knows what you will encounter and is always at work training you by the circumstances He has allowed. Everything He does is only always motivated by His Fatherly love.

Hebrews 12:7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?

Hebrews 12:8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

Hebrews 12:9 Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected *us*, and we paid *them* respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?

Hebrews 12:10 For they indeed for a few days chastened *us* as seemed *best* to them, but He for *our* profit, that *we* may be partakers of His holiness.

Hebrews 12:11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

God is "the Father of spirits" - your spiritual Father - and you can depend on His training. If you will "endure" and "readily be in subjection" to His training it will "profit" you in two ways: You will be a "partaker of His holiness," and it will produce "the peaceable fruit of righteousness."

I often told my kids that they would ultimately enjoy life more, and have greater freedom in life, if they would trust and submit to our training. That is what the writer is saying in these verses. God wants to produce His "holiness" in your heart, and He wants to produce His "fruit of righteousness" through your walk. All you have to do is submit to Him out of "respect."

The final verses tie everything together. God has determined your run. He is constantly disciplining you out of love to build endurance for what lies ahead. If you will also discipline yourself you will run your race with endurance.

Hebrews 12:12 Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees,  
Hebrews 12:13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be *dislocated*, but rather be healed.

The Hebrew Christians were letting "weariness" and "discouragement" (v3) turn into "lameness." They were like runners who had stopped along the course, with their "hands hang[ing] down" and their "knees" locked. Instead of *ending* their persecutions they should *endure* them by continuing "straight" along the "path" God had set out. The solution was not to stop or to turn back. Stopping or turning back would result in aggravating their "lameness" into a "dislocation." Instead, if they would simply take the next step forward, they would find their weariness and discouragement "healed."

The healing is described in verse fourteen:

Hebrews 12:14 Pursue peace with all *people*, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

There is a play on words we don't see in English. The word "pursue" means *follow*. If you look in your Strong's concordance you'll find it can sometimes be translated *persecute*. They were thinking of turning back because of persecution. Instead they should **persecute** - "pursue" - the run God had set before them.

The result of pressing forward would be "peace with all people, and holiness." Returning to Judaism would not bring them peace with people. It would cause animosity among the Christians who remained true to God. And, even though their Jewish families and

friends were pressuring them, they would only disrespect them more for their hypocrisy of turning back from following Jesus.

"Holiness" means the practical, day-by-day progress of becoming more like Jesus. You can't become more like Jesus if you turn back from the path He has set before you.

The phrase "without which no one will see the Lord" refers, I think, to your witness among unbelievers. When unbelievers see your peace and holiness they see Jesus living in and through you. If they don't see your peace and holiness they will not "see the Lord" and they will not be drawn to Him for their own salvation.

The writer recognizes the possibility that some of his readers might nevertheless decide to *end* rather than *endure* their persecutions. He spells out the consequences:

Hebrews 12:15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;  
Hebrews 12:16 lest there *be* any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

"Fall short" means to *fall back*. It described Hebrew Christians who would return to Judaism. "Fall[ing] short of the grace of God" doesn't mean they forfeited their salvation; it means they failed to avail themselves of the abundant spiritual resources available to them to endure. Instead of "peace" and "holiness," their lives would manifest "bitterness" and "defile[ment]." "Bitterness" is said to "spring up and cause trouble." It means their hearts would be *crowded* with and *vexed* by bitterness. "Defilement" describes the stumbling effect their backsliding would have on others who were similarly struggling; notice it says that "many" would "become defiled."

Esau is given as the example. Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekkah. Esau was oldest and in line to inherit the spiritual blessings of the firstborn son. One day he was hungry. Jacob was cooking soup. Esau agreed to sell his spiritual birthright for a bowl of soup! Now he wasn't going to starve; it's a symbolic act to show he had no desire for spiritual things. He was "a fornicator" and "profane." "Fornicator" refers probably to spiritual fornication; he had a divided heart and was committing spiritual fornication against

God. "Profane" doesn't mean he swore all the time. It literally means *threshold*. On the threshold you wipe your feet to shake off the dirt and dust. It's a picture of Esau trampling on his spiritual blessings.

The Hebrew Christian who fell short of the spiritual blessings available to them to press forward would be like Esau. They would be despising God's blessings and trampling them underfoot! What's more,

Hebrews 12:17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.

It's a long story but Isaac was tricked into blessing Jacob with the birthright instead of Esau. It was all by God's design since the blessing of the birthright was essentially spiritual and Esau really despised spiritual things. Still, Esau wanted it - but he was "rejected" even "though he sought it with tears" **because Isaac could not repent**. Isaac could not change **his** mind. The pronouncing of the blessing was a one-time act that had serious consequences for Esau.

God was offering the Hebrew Christians the spiritual blessings of their birthright that would enable and empower them to endure their run. If they instead decided to end their persecutions, they would be despising the blessings available to them. They would be trampling underfoot their blessings along the road back to Judaism

It was a decision that had serious spiritual consequences. Though they might later "[seek] it diligently with tears," **God would not repent**.

As we saw in chapter six, there are some decisions from which you can never fully recover in terms of their earthly consequences.

## Conclusion

There's a word in verse seventeen that puts everything we've been saying into perspective. It's the word "afterward."

You are running a race. You can go *forward* or fall *backward*. You'll go forward by thinking of what happens "afterward."



