

## HEBREWS 12

### STAY IN THE RUNNING

If the apostle Paul were alive today, he would probably read the sports pages of the newspaper and follow the progress of various teams and athletes. Why? Because several athletic references in his letters indicate his interest in sports. Of course, both the Greeks and the Romans were keenly interested in athletic contests, not only for their physical well-being, but also for the honor of their towns and countries. It was a patriotic thing to be a good athlete and to bring glory to your country.

The writer of Hebrews combined these two themes of athletics and citizenship in this important twelfth chapter. The atmosphere is that of the footraces in the arena. We can see the runners laying aside their training weights and striving to run their races successfully. Some get weary and faint, while others endure to the end and win the prize. First the writer pictures the race (Heb. 12:1–13), and then emphasizes citizenship in the heavenly city (Heb. 12:14–29). In the minds of his readers, these two themes would go together, for no one could take part in the official games unless he was a citizen of the nation.

The one theme that runs through this chapter is *endurance* (Heb. 12:1 [“patience”], 2–3, 7; also see 10:32, 36 [“patience”]). The Jewish believers who received this letter were getting weary and wanted to give up; but the writer encouraged them to keep moving forward in their Christian lives, like runners on a track (see Phil. 3:12–14). He pointed out three divine resources that encourage a Christian to keep going when the situation is difficult.

#### **The Example of the Son of God (12:1–4)**

When I was in junior high school, I had a coach who felt it his duty to make an athlete out of me. Everybody in my class could have told him he was wasting his time, because I was the worst athlete in the class—perhaps in the school! I entered a city-wide school competition, running the low hurdles. I knocked down six hurdles, fractured my left ankle, and immediately abandoned my sports career. (Shortly after, the coach enlisted in the army. I may have driven him to it.)

Coach Walker used several techniques to get me to do my best. “Other students have done it, and so can you!” was one of his encouragements. “Just think of what it will do for you physically!” was another. “Now, watch the other kids—see how they do it!” was a third. As I reflect on this experience, I am amazed to discover that these same three approaches are used in this paragraph, to encourage us in the Christian race.

**Look around at the winners (v. 1a)!** The “great ...cloud [assembly, mass] of witnesses” was introduced to us in Hebrews 11. They are the heroes of the faith. It is not suggested here that these men and women now in heaven are watching us as we run the race, like people seated in a stadium. The word “witnesses” does not mean “spectators.” Our English word *martyr* comes directly from the Greek word translated “witness.” These

people are not witnessing what we are doing; rather, they are bearing witness *to us* that God can see us through. God bore witness to them (Heb. 11:2, 4–5, 39) and they are bearing witness now to us.

“I rarely read the Old Testament, except for Psalms and Proverbs,” a believer once told me. “Then you are missing a great deal of spiritual help,” I replied. I asked him to open to Romans 15:4 and read the verse aloud. “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” I then explained that “patience” means “endurance,” and that “comfort” means “encouragement.” One of the best ways to develop endurance and encouragement is to get to know the godly men and women of the Old Testament who ran the race and won. If you are having problems with your family, read about Joseph. If you think your job is too big for you, study the life of Moses. If you are tempted to retaliate, see how David handled this problem.

**Look at yourself (v. 1b)!** Athletes used to wear training weights to help them prepare for the events. No athlete would actually participate wearing the weights because they would slow him down. (The modern analogy is a baseball player who swings a bat with a heavy metal collar on it before he steps to the plate.) Too much weight would tax one’s endurance.

What are the “weights” that we should remove so that we might win the race? Everything that hinders our progress. They might even be “good things” in the eyes of others. A winning athlete does not choose between the good and the bad; he chooses between the better and the best.

We should also get rid of “the sin that so easily entangles” (Heb. 12:1 NIV). While he does not name any specific sin, the writer was probably referring to the sin of unbelief. It was unbelief that kept Israel out of the Promised Land, and it is unbelief that hinders us from entering into our spiritual inheritance in Christ. The phrase “by faith” (or “through faith”) is used twenty-one times in Hebrews 11, indicating that it is faith in Christ that enables us to endure.

**Look at Jesus Christ (vv. 2–4)!** He is “the author [originator] and finisher of our faith.” It was in “looking to him” that we were saved, for *to look* means “to trust.” When the dying Jews looked to the uplifted serpent, they were healed, and this is an illustration of our salvation through faith in Christ (Num. 21:4–9; John 3:14–16). “Looking unto Jesus” describes an *attitude* of faith and not just a single act. When our Lord was here on earth, He lived by faith. The mystery of His divine and human natures is too profound for us to understand fully, but we do know that He had to trust His Father in heaven as He lived day by day. The writer of Hebrews quoted our Lord saying, “I will put my trust in him” (Heb. 2:13). (The quotation is from Isa. 8:17.) The fact that Jesus *prayed* is evidence that He lived by faith.

Our Lord endured far more than did any of the heroes of faith named in Hebrews 11, and therefore He is a perfect example for us to follow. *He endured the cross!* This involved shame, suffering, the “contradiction [opposition]” of sinners, and even temporary rejection by the Father. On the cross He suffered for *all* the sins of *all* the world! Yet He endured and finished the work the Father gave Him to do (John 17:4). Though the readers of Hebrews had suffered persecution, they had not yet “resisted unto blood” (Heb. 12:4). None of them was yet a martyr. But in Jesus’ battle against sin, He shed His own blood.

What was it that enabled our Lord to endure the cross? Please keep in mind that during His ministry on earth, our Lord did not use His divine powers for His own personal needs. Satan tempted Him to do this (Matt. 4:1–4), but Jesus refused. It was our Lord’s *faith* that enabled Him to endure. He kept the eye of faith on “the joy that was set before him.” From Psalm 16:8–10, He knew that He would come out of the tomb alive. (Peter referred to this messianic psalm in his sermon at Pentecost, Acts 2:24–33.) In that psalm (16:11) David spoke about “fullness of joy” in the presence of the Father. Also, from Psalm 110:1, 4, Jesus knew that He would be exalted to heaven in glory. (Peter also quoted this psalm, Acts 2:34–36.) So “the joy that was set before him” would include Jesus’ completing the Father’s will, His resurrection and exaltation, and His joy in presenting believers to the Father in glory (Jude 24).

Throughout this epistle, the writer emphasized the importance of the *future hope*. His readers were prone to *look back* and want to *go back*, but he encouraged them to follow Christ’s example and *look ahead* by faith. The heroes of faith named in the previous chapter lived for the future, and this enabled them to endure (Heb. 11:10, 14–16, 24–27). Like Peter, when we get our eyes of faith off the Savior, we start to sink (Matt. 14:22–33).

Since Christ is the “author and finisher of our faith,” trusting Him releases His power in our lives. I could try to follow the example of some great athlete for years and still be a failure. But if, in my younger days, that athlete could have entered into my life and shared his know-how and ability with me, that would have made me a winner. Christ is both the exemplar *and the enabler!* As we see Him in the Word and yield to His Spirit, He increases our faith and enables us to run the race.

### **The Assurance of the Love of God (12:5–13)**

The key word in this section is *chastening*. It is a Greek word that means “child training, instruction, discipline.” A Greek boy was expected to “work out” in the gymnasium until he reached his maturity. It was a part of his preparation for adult life. The writer viewed the trials of the Christian life as spiritual discipline that could help a believer mature. Instead of trying to escape the difficulties of life, we should rather be “exercised” by them so that we might grow (Heb. 12:11). When we are suffering, it is easy to think that God does not love us. So the writer gave three proofs that chastening comes from the Father’s heart of love.

**The Scriptures (vv. 5–6).** The quotation is from Proverbs 3:11–12, a statement that his readers had known but had forgotten. (This is one of the sad consequences of getting “dull”

toward the Word; see Heb. 5:11–12.) This quotation (Heb. 12:5–6) is an exhortation,” which literally means “encouragement.” Because they forgot the Word, they lost their encouragement and were ready to give up! The key words in this quotation are “son,” “children,” and “sons.” These words are used six times in Hebrews 12:5–8. They refer to *adult sons* and not little children. (The word “children” in Heb. 12:5 should be “sons.”) A parent who would repeatedly chasten an *infant* child would be considered a monster. God deals with us as *adult sons* because we have been adopted and given an adult standing in His family (see Rom. 8:14–18; Gal. 4:1–7). The fact that the Father chastens us is proof that we are maturing, and it is the means by which we can mature even more.

Chastening is the evidence of the Father’s love. Satan wants us to believe that the difficulties of life are proof that God does *not* love us, but just the opposite is true. Sometimes God’s chastening is seen in His *rebukes* from the Word or from circumstances. At other times He shows His love by *punishing* (“the Lord ...scourgeth”) us with some physical suffering. Whatever the experience, we can be sure that His chastening hand is controlled by His loving heart. The Father does not want us to be pampered babies; He wants us to become mature adult sons and daughters who can be trusted with the responsibilities of life.

**Personal experience (vv. 7–11).** All of us had a father and, if this father was faithful, he had to discipline us. If a child is left to himself, he grows up to become a selfish tyrant. The point the writer made (Heb. 12:7–8) is that a father chastens *only his own sons*, and this is proof that they *are* his children. We may feel like spanking the neighbors’ children (and our neighbors may feel like spanking ours), but we cannot do it. God’s chastening is proof that we are indeed His children!

I have met in my ministry people who professed to be saved, but for some reason they never experienced any chastening. If they disobeyed, they seemed to get away with it. If I resisted God’s will and did not experience His loving chastening, I would be afraid that I was not saved! All true children of God receive His chastening. All others who claim to be saved, but who escape chastening, are nothing but counterfeits—illegitimate children.

Why do good earthly fathers correct their kids? So that their offspring might show them reverence (respect) and obey what they command. This is why the heavenly Father corrects us: He wants us to reverence Him and obey His will. A child who does not learn subjection to authority will never become a useful, mature adult. Any of God’s children who rebel against His authority are in danger of death! “Shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?” (Heb. 12:9). The suggestion is that, if we do not submit, *we might not live*. “There is a sin unto death” (1 John 5:16).

We can see now how this twelfth chapter relates to the five exhortations in Hebrews. As a Christian drifts from the Word and backslides, the Father chastens him to bring him back to the place of submission and obedience. (If God does not chasten, that person is not truly born again.) If a believer *persists* in resisting God’s will, God may permit his life to be taken. Rather than allow His child to ruin his life further and disgrace the Father’s name, God

might permit him to die. God killed thousands of rebellious Jews in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:1–12). Why should He spare us? Certainly this kind of chastening is not His usual approach, but it is possible, and we had better show Him reverence and fear. He chastens us for our profit so that we might share His holy character.

**The blessed results (vv. 11–13).** No chastening at the time is pleasant either to the father or to his son, but the benefits are profitable. I am sure that few children believe it when their parents say, “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” But it is true just the same. The Father does not enjoy having to discipline His children, but the benefits afterward make the chastening an evidence of His love.

What are some of the benefits? For one thing, there is “the peaceable fruit of righteousness.” Instead of continuing to sin, the child strives to do what is right. There is also peace instead of war—“the peaceable fruit of righteousness.” The rebellion has ceased and the child is in a loving fellowship with the Father. Chastening also encourages a child to *exercise* in spiritual matters—the Word of God, prayer, meditation, witnessing, and so forth. All of this leads to a new *joy*. Paul described it: “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

Of course, the important thing is how God’s child responds to chastening. He can despise it or faint under it (Heb. 12:5), both of which are wrong. He should show reverence to the Father by submitting to His will (Heb. 12:9), using the experience to exercise himself spiritually (Heb. 12:11; 1 Tim. 4:7–8). Hebrews 12:12–13 sound like a coach’s orders to his team! Lift up your hands! Strengthen those knees (Isa. 35:3)! Get those lazy feet on the track (Prov. 4:26)! On your mark, get set, GO!

The example of God’s Son, and the assurance of God’s love, certainly should encourage us to endure in the difficult Christian race. But there is a third resource.

### **The Enablement of God’s Grace (12:14–29)**

As we run the Christian race, what is our goal? The writer explained the goal in Hebrews 12:14: *Peace* with all men, and *holiness* before the Lord. (Remember “the *peaceable* fruit of *righteousness*,” Heb. 12:11.) These two goals remind us of our Lord’s high priestly ministry—King of *peace* and King of *righteousness* (Heb. 7:1–2). It requires diligence to run the race successfully lest we “fail of the grace of God” (Heb. 12:15). God’s grace does not fail, but we can fail to take advantage of His grace. At the end of the chapter, there is another emphasis on grace (Heb. 12:28). In this section, the writer encouraged his readers to depend on the grace of God by urging them to look by faith in three directions.

**Look back—the bad example of Esau (vv. 15–17).** Esau certainly failed to act on God’s grace. The account is given in Genesis 25:27–34; 27:30–45. Esau was “a profane person,” which means “a common person, one who lives for the world and not God.” (Our English word literally means “outside the temple,” or not belonging to God.) Esau despised his birthright and sold it to Jacob, and he missed the blessing because it was given to Jacob. (It was supposed to go to Jacob anyway, but it was wrong for Jacob to use trickery to get it. See Gen. 25:19–26). Afterward, Esau tried to get Isaac to change his mind, but it was too late.

Even Esau's tears availed nothing. What sins will rob us of the enabling of God's grace? These verses tell us: lack of spiritual diligence, bitterness against others (see Deut. 29:18), sexual immorality, and living for the world and the flesh. Some people have the idea that a "profane person" is blasphemous and filthy, but Esau was a congenial fellow, a good hunter, and a man who loved his father. He would have made a fine neighbor—but he was not interested in the things of God.

God's grace does not fail, but we can fail to depend on God's grace. Esau is a warning to us not to live for lesser things.

**Look up—the glory of the heavenly city (vv. 18–24).** The writer of Hebrews contrasted Mount Sinai and the giving of the law with the heavenly Mount Zion and the blessings of grace in the church (see Ex. 19:10–25; 20:18–21; Deut. 4:10–24). He described the solemnity and even the terror that were involved in the giving of the law (Heb. 12:18–21). The people were afraid to hear God's voice, and even Moses feared and trembled! God set boundaries around the mount, and even if an animal trespassed, it was slain with a spear ("dart"). Of course, God had to impress on His people the seriousness of His law, just as we must with our own children. This was the infancy of the nation, and children can understand reward and punishment.

What a relief it is to move from Mount Sinai to Mount Zion! Mount Sinai represents the old covenant of law, and Mount Zion represents the new covenant of grace in Jesus Christ (see Gal. 4:19–31). The heavenly city is God's Mount Zion (see Ps. 2; 110:1–2, 4). This is the city that the patriarchs were looking for by faith (Heb. 11:10, 14–17). The earthly Jerusalem was about to be destroyed by the Romans, but the heavenly Jerusalem would endure forever.

He described the "citizens" that make up the population of this city. Innumerable angels are there. The church is there, for believers have their citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20), and their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). "Firstborn" is a title of dignity and rank. Esau was actually Isaac's firstborn, but he rejected his privileges and lost his blessing and birthright.

God is there, of course, and so are the Old Testament saints ("spirits of just men made perfect"). Jesus Christ the Mediator is there, the One who shed His blood for us. We learned that Abel is still speaking (Heb. 11:4), and here we discover that Christ's blood speaks "better things than that of Abel" (Heb. 12:24). Abel's blood spoke from the earth and cried for justice (Gen. 4:10), while Christ's blood speaks from heaven and announces mercy for sinners. Abel's blood made Cain feel guilty (and rightly so) and drove him away in despair (Gen. 4:13–15), but Christ's blood frees us from guilt and has opened the way into the presence of God. Were it not for the blood of the new covenant, we could not enter this heavenly city!

"Why is there so little preaching and teaching about heaven?" a friend asked me. And then he gave his own answer, which is probably correct. "I guess we have it so good on earth, we just don't think about heaven."

When the days are difficult and we are having a hard time enduring, that is when we should look up and contemplate the glories of heaven. Moses “endured, as seeing him who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27). The patriarchs endured as they looked ahead to the city God was preparing for them. One way to lay hold of God’s grace is to look ahead by faith to the wonderful future He has prepared for us.

**Look ahead—the unshakable kingdom (vv. 25–29).** God is speaking to us today through His Word and His providential workings in the world. We had better listen! If God shook things at Sinai and those who refused to hear were judged, how much more responsible are we today who have experienced the blessings of the new covenant! God today is shaking things. (Have you read the newspapers lately?) He wants to tear down the “scaffolding” and reveal the unshakable realities that are eternal. Alas, too many people (including Christians) are building their lives on things that can shake.

The “shaking” quotation is from Haggai 2:6 and refers to that time when the Lord shall return and fill His house with glory. As events draw nearer to that time, we shall see more shaking in this world. But a Christian can be confident, for he shall receive an unshakable kingdom. In fact, he is a part of God’s kingdom today.

What shall we do as we live in a shaking world? Listen to God speak and obey Him. Receive grace day by day to serve Him “with reverence and godly fear.” Do not be distracted or frightened by the tremendous changes going on around you. Keep running the race with endurance. Keep looking to Jesus Christ. Remember that your Father loves you. And draw on God’s enabling grace. While others are being frightened, you can be confident!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This Commentary was written by Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Confident (Hebrews): Live by Faith, Not by Sight (The BE Series Commentary)*