Run to Finish

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Faith / Hebrews 12:1–3

When Jesus called people to follow Him, He never promised them an easy life. In fact, He told them something that would probably surprise many people today. He said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Think about what Jesus was saying. Following Him would require sacrifice, a willingness to surrender our own desires and remain faithful even when obedience comes at a cost. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be a light in this world, pointing others toward Him through our words and actions. But we are also commanded to be holy, because He is holy (Matthew 5:14–16; 1 Peter 1:15–16). Our lives should reflect the character of the One we proclaim. And living this way is not always easy. It requires us to place God's will above our own desires and choose obedience when compromise would be easier. When we placed our faith in Jesus Christ, we became new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). And as we grow in our faith, our lives should increasingly reflect His character, making us distinct from the world around us.

But following Jesus has always come at a cost. The early Christians often faced tremendous opposition and persecution because of their faith. The believers to whom Hebrews was written knew this firsthand. They had already endured suffering for Christ, and some were now in danger of growing weary and turning away. That is why the writer urged them not to throw away their confidence, but to persevere and receive what God had promised (Hebrews 10:32–36). And although most of us living in Canada today do not face the same level of persecution, following Jesus can still come at a cost. Perhaps you have experienced ridicule because of your Christian convictions. Maybe someone has questioned your intelligence because you believe the Bible is God's Word. Or

perhaps you have felt pressure to remain silent about Jesus because you don't want to offend someone or damage a friendship. Sometimes the opposition is subtle, coming through the expectation that we keep our faith private or compromise our convictions to gain the acceptance of others.

Jesus Himself warned His disciples that following Him would bring opposition. In John 15:20, He reminded them that if the world persecuted Him, it would persecute His followers as well. And that raises an important question: What happens when following Jesus becomes difficult? Do we begin to compromise? Do we remain silent? Or do we continue following Christ, regardless of the cost?

That is the challenge the writer of Hebrews places before us. He calls us to persevere, even when the race becomes difficult. And to help us understand what that perseverance looks like, he compares the Christian life to a race—not a short sprint, but a race requiring endurance, discipline, and a willingness to keep going. And above all, a race in which we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ.

The Cost of Following Christ

In the decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christianity began spreading throughout the Roman Empire. What began with a relatively small group of believers in Jerusalem grew as the apostles carried the gospel into new cities and regions. On the day of Pentecost, about three thousand people accepted Peter's message and were baptized (Acts 2:41). And as the gospel continued to spread, churches were established throughout Judea, Asia Minor, Greece, and eventually Rome itself. But as Christianity grew, so did the opposition against those who followed Jesus.

Consider Stephen, a man described as being “full of God’s grace and power” (Acts 6:8). He boldly proclaimed the truth about Jesus but was brought before

the Sanhedrin on charges of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and against God” (Acts 6:11). Although his “face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15), his testimony so enraged his opponents that they dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death (Acts 7:57–60). That very day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. Saul began destroying the church, going from house to house, dragging away both men and women and putting them into prison (Acts 8:1–3). Yet after Saul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, the Lord declared concerning him, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). And suffer he did! Paul would later recount being repeatedly imprisoned, severely flogged, exposed to death, beaten with rods, shipwrecked three times, and constantly facing danger from bandits, Jews, and Gentiles (2 Corinthians 11:23–29).

By the time Hebrews was written, Christianity had already experienced decades of growth and opposition, although the precise date of the letter remains uncertain [1]. Within the Roman Empire, Judaism was generally tolerated as an ancient, established religion, provided its communities maintained an acceptable relationship with Roman authorities [2]. Jewish communities could practise their ancestral customs and express loyalty to the emperor without necessarily participating in emperor worship [3]. Christianity initially benefited from its close association with Judaism [4], but as Christians proclaimed Jesus as the risen Lord and refused to participate in traditional religious worship, they increasingly faced suspicion and opposition [5]. The believers addressed in Hebrews knew firsthand what it meant to suffer for Christ (Hebrews 10:32–34). For those from a Jewish background, returning to their former religious practices may have seemed a way to escape further suffering. But the writer recognized the danger of turning away from Christ. They had already experienced the cost of following Jesus, and now they needed encouragement to remain faithful, regardless of what that faithfulness might cost them [6].

Remember Those who Ran Before Us

Hebrews 12:1 NIV

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,

Notice that the writer does not tell us to choose an easier race. He calls us to persevere in the race marked out for us, trusting God even when the path before us includes suffering, disappointment, or opposition. To encourage these weary believers to persevere, the writer of Hebrews uses an illustration familiar to people living in the ancient world: a runner competing in a race. Athletic competitions were popular throughout the Greek and Roman world, drawing large crowds to stadiums where runners competed before spectators [7]. These races required discipline, determination, and endurance, while officials oversaw the competitions and ensured that the rules were followed [8]. Imagine standing in one of those stadiums, surrounded by thousands of spectators, watching the runners push forward toward the finish line. Some would begin strongly, while others would struggle as exhaustion set in. But the goal was not simply to begin the race. It was to finish it. And the writer uses this familiar picture to illustrate the perseverance required in the Christian life.

With this imagery in mind, the writer reminds these persecuted believers that they are not the first to face difficulties in following God. Notice how the writer begins this verse with the word "Therefore." He is drawing a conclusion from everything he has just told us in Hebrews 11. Because so many men and women have trusted God through tremendous trials, suffering, and opposition, we too are encouraged to remain faithful. Their lives remind us that God can be trusted even when the road before us is difficult. Abel, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and many others were commended not because their lives were easy, but because they trusted God despite their circumstances. Some witnessed remarkable deliverances, while others suffered terribly without experiencing earthly relief.

Yet all were commended for their faith (Hebrews 11:35–39). Like the Apostle Paul, many of these faithful believers experienced tremendous suffering and opposition. Paul described his own experience as being "hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8–9).

Though these faithful believers had long since passed from this world, their testimony continued to speak. They were not likely spectators watching the race from heaven [9], but witnesses whose lives testified to the faithfulness of God. And their message to these struggling Christians was clear: Do not give up! The cost of following Christ may be great, and the difficulties may seem overwhelming, but remember those who have gone before you. They endured because they trusted the promises of God, even when they could not see their fulfilment. As Hebrews 11:1 reminds us, faith is "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Their testimony reminds us that persevering faith is possible, not because of our own strength, but because God is faithful to His promises [10].

Remove What is Holding You Back

The metaphorical language used by the writer of Hebrews reflects a practical reality of ancient Greek and Roman athletic competitions: runners needed to remove anything that might slow them down or interfere with their performance. Athletes would lay aside unnecessary clothing and anything else that could hinder their movement as they prepared to compete [11]. Their goal was to run as effectively as possible, without being weighed down by something that served no useful purpose. Imagine a runner stepping onto the track carrying unnecessary baggage or wearing clothing that restricted his movement. He would immediately be placing himself at a disadvantage. The writer uses this familiar picture to communicate an important spiritual truth. Just as an athlete must remove whatever interferes with his ability to run, Christians must examine

their lives and remove whatever hinders them from faithfully following Jesus Christ. And whether our race is long or short, the writer reminds us that what matters is faithfully persevering until we reach the finish line [12].

Notice that the writer identifies two things we must remove: "everything that hinders" and "the sin that so easily entangles." These are closely related, but they are not necessarily the same. Some things that hinder our spiritual growth may not be sinful in themselves. Our responsibilities, possessions, interests, and activities can all have a legitimate place in life, but when they begin consuming so much of our time and attention that we neglect prayer, God's Word, fellowship, or obedience to Christ, they can become unnecessary weights. Think about your own life for a moment. Is there something that has gradually taken a place in your heart that belongs to God? Something that may not be sinful in itself, but has become so important that your relationship with Christ is suffering because of it?

And think about what this meant for the original readers. Their desire to escape persecution, avoid rejection, or regain the acceptance of those around them could become a powerful hindrance to their faithfulness. The writer was reminding them that nothing, not even the desire for an easier life, should be allowed to draw them away from Christ. But he also tells us to throw off the sin that so easily entangles us. Sin is not merely an inconvenience; it is disobedience to God that can trap us, weaken our fellowship with Him, and draw us away from faithful living. We must not excuse it or become comfortable with it, but confess it, repent, and turn away from it. Paul uses similar athletic imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, reminding believers that runners exercise discipline because they are pursuing a prize. How much more should we exercise spiritual discipline as we seek to live lives worthy of the gospel!

While there are similarities between the ancient athletic races and the Christian life, there are also important differences. Athletes competed for crowns that would eventually fade, but Christians look forward to an eternal reward (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). And unlike an earthly race where only one runner receives

the prize, every believer is called to run faithfully the race God has marked out for them. James reminds us that our lives are like a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes (James 4:14). Think about that for a moment. Even if God grants us seventy, eighty, or ninety years, compared with eternity, our lives are incredibly brief. Yet the shortness of life does not make our race less important. It makes every moment we have to serve Christ that much more precious. Paul understood this when he declared that his only aim was to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him (Acts 20:24). And near the end of his life, he could confidently declare, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). What a wonderful testimony! Paul understood that the Christian life was not simply about beginning well, but about remaining faithful until the end. And that raises an important question for each of us: When our race is finished, will we be able to say the same? Or will we look back and realize that we allowed things of little eternal value to distract us from the race God had called us to run? But removing the things that hinder us is only part of the challenge. The writer also reminds us that we must continue running, even when the race becomes difficult.

Run with Perseverance as Victors, Not Victims

The world may have looked upon these Christians as victims because they had suffered persecution, lost possessions, and watched fellow believers endure imprisonment. But in Christ, they were not defeated. They possessed treasures that no persecutor could take away, promises that no earthly power could destroy, and a Saviour who would never abandon them. They might have lost everything this world considers valuable, but in Christ, they possessed something infinitely greater! And the same is true for us today. Some believers are running through seasons of joy, while others are struggling through grief, disappointment, illness, or uncertainty. Still others face persecution because of

their faith. Yet Jesus calls those who are persecuted because of righteousness blessed, declaring that theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10). Our circumstances may be very different, but our calling remains the same: to persevere in faith, pressing on toward the heavenly prize of God's calling in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14).

And although the writer of Hebrews does not describe heaven in these particular verses, he has already reminded us that the heroes of faith were looking forward to something far greater than anything this world could offer. Hebrews 11:16 tells us that they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one—and that God had prepared a city for them. And earlier, in Hebrews 10:34, he reminded these persecuted Christians that they had accepted the loss of their possessions because they knew they possessed something better and lasting. Think about that! These believers could lose their earthly possessions, their freedom, and even their lives, but they could never lose the eternal inheritance God had promised them. And what a wonderful inheritance that will be! Jesus has promised to bring His people to be with Him (John 14:2–3). Our present bodies, subject to weakness and decay, will one day be raised in glory and power (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). There will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:4). And in the New Jerusalem, the glory of God will illuminate the city, and Jesus Christ, the Lamb, will be its lamp (Revelation 21:23). Just imagine that! A life free from suffering, forever in the presence of our Saviour. That is the wonderful hope awaiting everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ.

But how do we continue running when the difficulties of life threaten to overwhelm us? Where do we find the strength to persevere? The writer of Hebrews now directs our attention away from ourselves and toward the One who makes our hope possible—Jesus Christ Himself.

Keeping Our Eyes Fixed on Jesus

Hebrews 12:2–3 NIV

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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In the final part of this passage, the writer of Hebrews directs our attention to the most important Person in the Christian race—Jesus Christ Himself. We have considered the heroes of faith, the things that hinder us, and the need to persevere through difficulties. But now the writer tells us where our attention must ultimately be focused. Hebrews 12:2 says, "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith." Notice that he does not simply tell us to try harder or rely upon our own determination. He directs our attention to Jesus Christ, the One who endured the greatest suffering and emerged victorious. But what does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus? It means keeping our attention firmly focused upon Him, trusting His promises, following His example, and refusing to allow the difficulties and distractions of life to draw us away from Him. Think about a runner approaching the finish line. If he continually looks behind him or becomes distracted by everything around him, he risks losing his focus. He must keep his eyes upon the goal. But our focus is not merely upon a distant finish line or an eternal reward. Our eyes are to be fixed upon Jesus Christ Himself, the One who makes that eternal hope possible [15].

And notice how the writer describes Jesus. He calls Him the "pioneer and perfecter of faith." Jesus is not simply another example of faithfulness alongside Abraham, Moses, or the other heroes of Hebrews 11. He is greater than them all! Hebrews 2:10 describes Him as the pioneer of our salvation, while Hebrews 5:8–9 reminds us that through His suffering and obedience, He became the source of eternal salvation. Jesus did not merely show us how to endure suffering. Through His sacrifice, He accomplished what was necessary for our salvation,

opening the way for us to be reconciled to God through faith in Him. Now consider what the writer tells us about His suffering. Hebrews 12:2 says that "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." Crucifixion was not only an agonizing form of execution; it was intended to humiliate and disgrace those who suffered it. Yet Jesus willingly endured the cross. He was not indifferent to its pain or humiliation, but He refused to allow that suffering to turn Him away from the Father's purpose. He looked beyond the suffering to the joy that lay ahead—the accomplishment of our salvation and His exaltation at the Father's right hand [13]. And now He is seated at the right hand of God, His saving work accomplished. The cross was not the end of His story. His suffering gave way to victory!

And that is why the writer tells us in Hebrews 12:3, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Remember these persecuted believers. They had experienced ridicule, suffering, and the loss of their possessions. Some were growing weary, but the writer reminded them that Jesus Himself had endured far greater opposition. Their Saviour understood what it meant to be rejected, mistreated, and persecuted. And because He had remained faithful through suffering, they could look to Him for encouragement to persevere [14]. And perhaps that is exactly what some of us need to hear today. You may be facing circumstances that have left you tired or discouraged. Perhaps you have been praying for years without seeing an answer, or struggling with illness, grief, disappointment, or the pressure of remaining faithful in a world that increasingly rejects God's Word. The writer does not promise that following Jesus will remove those difficulties. But he does tell us where to look when they threaten to overwhelm us. Look to Jesus! Remember what He endured for you. And remember that through Him we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence, receiving mercy and finding grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:14–16). When discouragement begins to overwhelm you, turn to God's Word and remember His promises. When you feel too weak to continue, come before His throne of

grace in prayer. And when you begin to question whether remaining faithful is worth the cost, remember what Jesus endured for you. We do not have to run this race relying upon our own strength. As Jesus reminded His disciples, apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:4–5).

And that is the great encouragement of this passage. The secret to finishing the Christian race is not simply having stronger legs or greater determination. It is keeping our eyes fixed upon the right Person. The heroes of faith remind us that perseverance is possible, but Jesus Christ is the One who has opened the way to eternal life and in whom our hope is secure. But perhaps there is someone here today who has never placed their faith in Jesus Christ. You may have spent much of your life trying to be a good person, hoping that somehow it will be enough to make you acceptable to God. But the wonderful message of the gospel is that we cannot earn our salvation through our own efforts. Jesus accomplished what we could never accomplish for ourselves. He died upon the cross for our sins, rose again from the dead, and offers eternal life to everyone who repents and places their faith in Him (Romans 10:9–10; Ephesians 2:8–9). So the question is not simply whether you are running the Christian race well, but whether you have ever trusted the One who makes that race possible. If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, I encourage you to come to Him today.

And for those of us who already belong to Christ, remember this: the race may be difficult, and there may be times when we grow weary or stumble. But our hope is not found in our own strength. It is found in Jesus Christ, who endured the cross, rose victorious, and is now seated at the right hand of God. So do not give up. Lay aside what hinders you, run with perseverance, and above all, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus Christ.

Footnotes

[1] Grant R. Osborne and George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 8–9.

[2] Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 105, 148, 152–153, 157.

[3] Ibid.

[4] S. Angus and A. M. Renwick, “Roman Empire and Christianity,” in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 4:214–216.

[5] Stephen G. Wilson, “Jewish-Christian Relations 70–170 C.E.,” in The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:835.

[6] Donald A. Hagner, Hebrews, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 174.

[7] Huber L. Drumwright and Philip C. Johnson, “Games,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea (Moody Press, 1975).

[8] James Hastings et al., in *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 282.

[9] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 332–333.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 2:322.

[12] John M'Clintock and James Strong, "Games," in *Cyclopædia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1891), 3:734.

[13] David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 583–584.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 134.