

LESSON 13

Staying Faithful for the Long Run

Faithfulness isn't a sprint of willpower. It's a long walk, one ordinary day at a time, with your eyes fixed on Jesus.

Faithfulness is built one ordinary day at a time.

WATCH BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Scan to watch the Lesson 13 teaching video – a 12-minute companion to this lesson.

CORE SCRIPTURE

Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

—Hebrews 12:1-2

Your Christian Life After the Early Fireworks

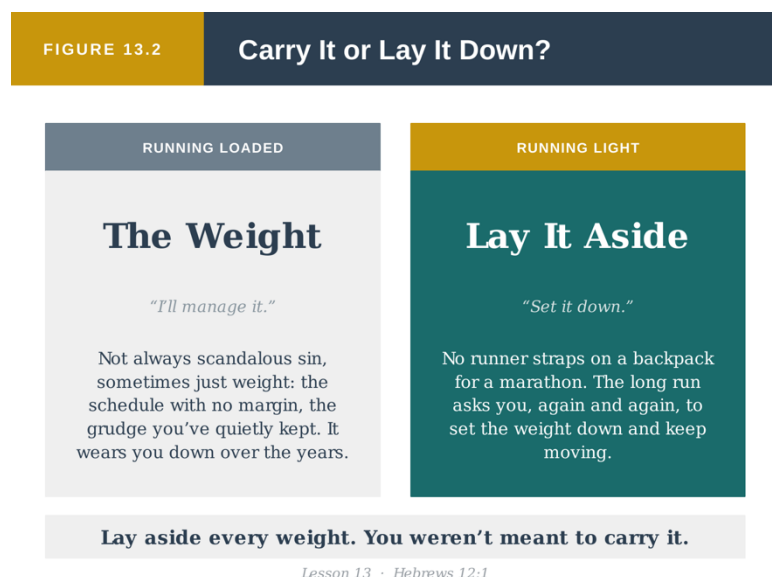
The first months of following Jesus often come with a kind of momentum. Everything is new. The Bible reads like a letter addressed to you, worship catches in your throat, and you can feel yourself changing week to week. Then, somewhere along the way, the newness wears off. The feelings level out. Bible reading becomes a thing you do whether or not it sparkles, and Sunday rolls around again, and you realize the Christian life is going to be longer and more ordinary than the opening chapter led you to expect.

The question that decides a Christian life usually isn't whether you start with passion. Almost everyone does. The question is whether you're still walking with Jesus in ten years, in twenty, when the early fireworks are a distant memory and faith has become the quiet background music of an ordinary life.

The good news is that staying faithful for the long run was never going to depend on you keeping the fireworks going. It depends on something much steadier, and much more durable, than how you happen to feel this week.

DISCUSSION: Have you noticed the early momentum starting to level off? What has it been like to move from the new-and-exciting stage toward something more ordinary?

Lay Down What is Weighing You



Hebrews pictures the Christian life as a long-distance race, and it opens with a word about baggage. "Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us" (Hebrews 12:1).

Notice he names two different things. There's sin, the stuff that obviously trips you, and there's hindrance, which is broader. A hindrance isn't necessarily wrong; it's just weight. No runner straps on a backpack for a

marathon. Some of what wears Christians down over the years isn't scandalous sin at all. It's the slow accumulation of good things turned heavy: the schedule with no margin, the grudge you've quietly decided to keep. The long run asks you, again and again, to set things down.

And see where the strength to do that comes from. You're surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, the faithful who ran before you and finished. You are not the first to run this, and you are not running it alone. People made it to the end of this road. So can you.

DISCUSSION: What's one weight, not necessarily a sin, just a weight, that's been slowing you down lately? What would it look like to set it down?

Run With Endurance

Then comes the key word. "Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us" (Hebrews 12:1). Not run fast. Run with endurance. The Christian life is not a sprint you win with one heroic burst. It's the long, steady kind of running, the kind measured in years.

FIGURE 13.1

Sprint or Long Walk?

A BURST OF WILLPOWER

The Sprint

"Keep the fireworks going."

Run on the early rush of new feelings. When the newness wears off and the feelings level out, you run out of fuel.

ONE ORDINARY DAY

The Long Walk

"Run with endurance."

The steady kind of running, measured in years. You take the next ordinary step today, and then take it again tomorrow.

Faithfulness isn't a sprint. It's a long walk.

Lesson 13 · Hebrews 12:1

This redefines what faithfulness is. We tend to imagine it as something dramatic, a grand act of devotion in a crisis. But the faithfulness the New Testament asks for is mostly unspectacular. It's praying again on a morning you don't feel like it. It's showing up to worship on a tired Sunday and choosing, one more time, to open the Bible. None of those moments feel heroic. Stacked end to end over decades, they are exactly what a faithful life is made of.

That should come as a relief. You don't have to manufacture some enormous reservoir of devotion to last the distance. You only have to take the next ordinary step of obedience today, and then do it again tomorrow. Faithfulness is built one ordinary day at a time, which means it's built in days just like the one you're in right now.

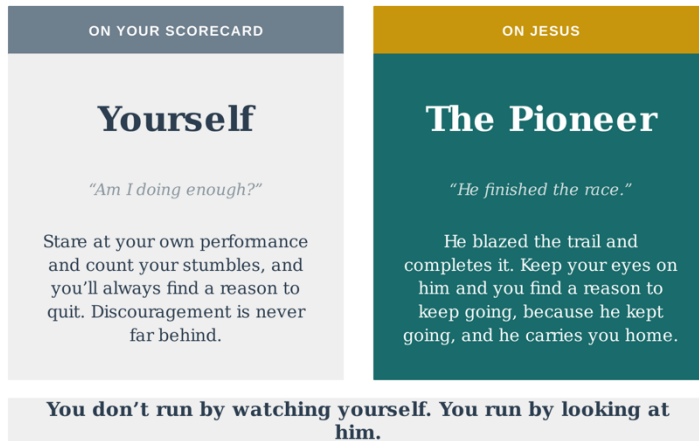
DISCUSSION: Where have you been waiting to feel more spiritual before you act, instead of just taking the next ordinary step? What's one small step available to you today?

Eyes on Jesus

But how do you keep running when your own progress is hard to see and your stumbles are easy to count? Hebrews gives one instruction, and it isn't look harder at yourself. "Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1–2).

FIGURE 13.3

Where Are Your Eyes?



Lesson 13 · Hebrews 12:2

Keep your eyes on Jesus. That's how endurance works, and it's the opposite of what most of us do. When we get serious about lasting, we usually start staring at our own performance, checking our progress and growing discouraged when the numbers disappoint. Hebrews points your gaze somewhere else entirely. You don't run by examining yourself. You run by looking at him.

And look at what it calls him: the pioneer and perfecter of your faith.

He blazed the trail and he completes

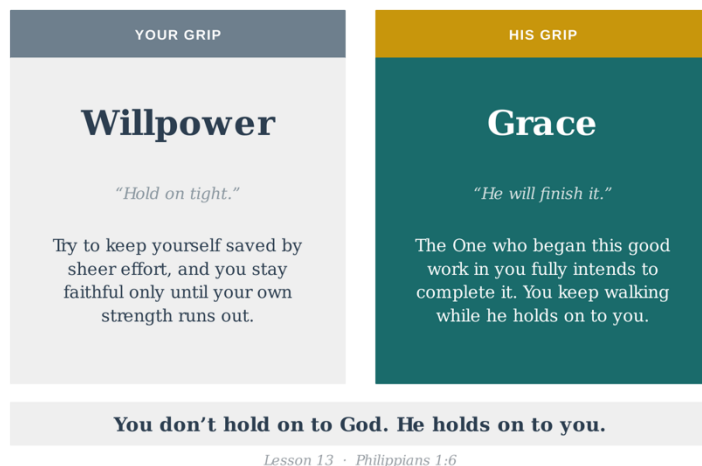
it. He isn't standing at the finish line with a stopwatch, judging your pace. He has already run this, all the way through suffering, "for the joy that lay before him." When your eyes are on your own record, you'll always find a reason to quit. When they're on Jesus, you find a reason to keep going, because he kept going, and he's the one carrying you home.

DISCUSSION: When you take spiritual inventory, do you tend to look mostly at yourself or mostly at Jesus? What might change this week if you kept your eyes on him instead of your scorecard?

He Will Finish What He Started

FIGURE 13.4

Who Holds On?



We come, at the very end, to the most reassuring sentence a tired Christian can hear. Paul wrote it to people he loved and worried about: "I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

Read who does the work. Every verb in that sentence belongs to God, not to you. This is where the long run finally makes sense. You don't stay faithful by gripping your own willpower until your strength runs

out. You stay faithful because the One who began this in you, back when you barely understood what was happening, has every intention of finishing it, and he does not abandon what he starts.

So as this first study on Christian growth draws toward its close, hear the truth that has been under every lesson. You were rescued by grace. You are being changed by grace. And you will be kept, all the way to the end, by that same grace. Your job was never to hold on to God by your own strength. It was to keep walking, one ordinary day at a time, while he holds on to you.

He started the work. He carries it on. He will finish it. That is enough to walk on for the rest of your life.

DISCUSSION: Does your confidence for the long run rest more on your willpower or on God's faithfulness to finish what he started? What would it free you to do if you really trusted the second one?

Looking to Jesus

This whole lesson has asked you to keep walking, one ordinary day at a time, with your eyes on Jesus. Jesus himself walked a long, hard road, and he did not turn back.

Luke marks the turning point with a single sentence. "When the days were coming to a close for him to be taken up, he determined to journey to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). The older wording is even more vivid: he set his face toward Jerusalem. He knew what waited there, and he went anyway. He pointed himself toward the city and started walking.

It was not a single dramatic leap. It was a journey, chapter after chapter of Luke, through village after village and ordinary days on the road, every step carrying him closer to the hardest thing he would ever do. He could have turned aside at a hundred points. He never did. Day by day, he kept his face set toward the goal, because of the joy on the far side of it, the joy of bringing you home.

That's the One you're looking at when Hebrews says to keep your eyes on Jesus. He isn't asking you to walk a road he avoided. He walked the longest, costliest road there is, all the way to the end, and he finished it. The Savior who set his face toward Jerusalem for you is more than able to keep you walking toward him, one ordinary day at a time, until you finish too.

REFLECTION: Jesus set his face toward the goal and kept walking, one ordinary day at a time. As your first year comes to a close, what would it look like to keep your face set toward him in the year ahead?

DON'T FORGET

Scan to watch the Lesson 13 teaching video – a 12-minute companion to this lesson