

Running the Race

Scripture often uses metaphors to help us grasp the essence and significance of our life in Christ Jesus. For example: Our life in Christ is often likened to a war—a persistent and deadly war. We have been outfitted with supernatural armor and weaponry, empowered to stand firm against the schemes of the devil and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, and we are to obey and follow the call of Christ, our Captain. Our life in Christ is likened to a pilgrimage—a lifelong journey through a dangerous and foreign land. This metaphor reminds us that we do not belong to this world, but to the next. Here, we are exiles and sojourners, temporarily passing through as we make our way to our eternal and heavenly home. Our life in Christ is likened to emancipation—that of a slave who has been set free. Once, we were bound by sin, without hope, and unable to be freed. But now in Christ Jesus, we have been liberated. We have been set free with purpose, not to return to our former bondage, but to walk in newness of life, according to our new Master, Jesus Christ.

Other biblical metaphors describe Christians as branches joined to a life-giving vine; as children lovingly adopted into the family of God; as radiant lights shining in a dark and cold world; as salt preserving all that is good; and as sheep who are tenderly cared for by a good and loving Shepherd. These images capture different aspects of our calling and the challenges of following the Lord Jesus Christ. These metaphors give us great insight, encouraging us to be faithful and to deepen our reliance upon the Lord God. They also provide us with a profound sense of identity, purpose, and hope.

This morning, we will explore one of my favorite metaphors: the Christian life as a race. Please turn with me to the book of Hebrews. Before we dive into the particulars of this passage, it's helpful to consider the background and context of this book.

Hebrews was written to Jews who had embraced the gospel and placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But as a result of their conversion, these new Christians faced great difficulty, including social exclusion, economic loss, and intense persecution. In fact, their suffering had become so severe that some were tempted to abandon their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and return to their former manner of life, which was Judaism. The author of Hebrews encouraged them by reminding them of what they had already endured.

Hebrews 10:32-34 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

This reminder was a call to persevere, to stand firm, and to hold fast. The author did not dismiss or ignore their previous suffering but pointed them back to it, to how they had already faithfully endured it, with great conviction and joy, being anchored in the hope of the unshakable promise of a better possession. Amid their current troubles, the Hebrews were exhorted to remain steadfast, urging them not to abandon the faith or return to their former manner of life. “Do not turn back to Judaism. Do not shrink back to destruction, for what has come in Christ Jesus is far superior.”

The book of Hebrews presents a single, overarching argument: Jesus Christ is better—Jesus Christ is superior. He is utterly without equal and is greater in degree and unmatched in kind. Jesus Christ fulfilled and surpassed everything that came before Him. He rendered every previous institution and covenant obsolete by becoming their fulfillment. Jesus is greater than the angels, for they are but servants, but He is the enthroned Son of God. Jesus is greater than Moses, for he was a faithful servant in God's house, but Christ is the Son over God's house. Jesus is greater than the Levitical priests, for He is a

priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Jesus mediates a better covenant, built on better promises, enacted through an infinitely better sacrifice, His own blood, once for all. The entire structure of the old covenant, with its rituals, sacrifices, and tabernacle, served only as a shadow, pointing forward to the reality found in Christ Jesus. And now that the true substance has come, to turn back would not just be foolish, it would be fatal. In light of Christ's supremacy and His fulfillment of all of God's promises, stand firm and hold fast to the faith. No matter the difficulty, persecution, or suffering, do not turn back from following the Lord Jesus Christ.

This call to endurance was not only for them; it is also for us. Though our circumstances may differ, the temptation to drift, to doubt, or to return to our old lives is still very real. Whether you face subtle pressure or outright hostility, the message remains the same: stand firm, hold fast, and press on to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 10:39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

This is vital: in every trial, in every loss, in every fear, Jesus Christ is sufficient. He remains your strength, your salvation, and your hope. Do not shrink back, have faith, He is enough. And now, the author of Hebrews redirects our gaze forward, to the race set before us, to the endurance required, and most importantly, to the One who leads and guides us –Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Let's look at the text together.

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

In this passage, we are given:

1. Encouragement to run the race (v1a).
2. Hindrances to avoid while running the race (v1b).
3. Help to assist us in running the race (vv2-3).

The Scriptures often depict the Christian life as a race. Contrary to much of what passes for Christianity today, ours is not a life of comfort, ease, or luxury. Rather, the Christian life is a call to persevere and prevail. It is a demanding race. It is a grueling race. It is fiercely intense and requires your all. In fact, the Greek word translated “race” is *agōn*, from which we get our English word agony.

In our passage this morning, we gain a proper understanding of what it takes to run and complete this agonizing race that has been set before us.

Encouragement To Run

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,

Here in this verse, we are given great encouragement to run, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Who are these witnesses? The witnesses are the men and women of great faith mentioned in the previous chapter, Hebrews 11. It recounts the faithful lives of Old Testament saints, whose examples serve as an encouragement to us. Their stories remind us that the race can be run and finished by faith. Hebrews 11 gives us a long list of those who did just that: Hebrews 11:4, by faith Abel; Hebrews 11:5, by faith Enoch; verse 7, by faith Noah; verse 8 and following, by faith Abraham, by faith Isaac, by faith Jacob, by faith Joseph, by faith Moses, by faith Rahab—and also Gideon, Barak, Samson,

Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. All of these bore witness to the faithfulness of God. And though they lived before the coming of Christ, they endured and persevered, trusting in the promises of God. These men and women:

Hebrews 11:33-40 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. 39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

This entire chapter powerfully sums up their stories and leads us directly into the call of Hebrews 12:1, to run our race with the same kind of enduring faith. The race set before you, today, has already been run and completed by others. The “cloud of witnesses” spoken of in Hebrews 11 faithfully ran their race, even when it led them through the most difficult and dangerous of trials. These witnesses encourage us to run, because their lives prove that a life of faith is not only possible, it is the only life worth living. Take Abraham, for example.

Hebrews 11:8-9 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

Abraham’s life stands as a powerful example for us, because like him, we also live in a foreign land. Like Abraham, we are strangers, sojourners, and exiles in this world. We are pilgrims just passing through. Our citizenship is not on earth but in heaven. And just as Abraham waited for the fulfillment of God’s promise, so do we wait for the promise of eternal life. If Abraham could walk by faith and wait upon the Lord, then why not you? Why not me? The cloud of witnesses that surrounds us serves as a testimony, living proof that a life of faith pleases and glorifies the Lord God. And isn’t it always encouraging to see someone who has gone before you successfully finish the race?

Consider the Apostle Paul. In his earlier writings, he spoke of the discipline required to stay in the race, a life of intentional effort, self-control, and spiritual focus.

1 Corinthians 9:27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Paul understood that running this race was not casual or comfortable. Rather, it demanded sacrifice. It required daily dying to self, saying no to the flesh, and yes to Christ Jesus. The language he uses is very strong. He didn’t pamper and coddle his body, he disciplined it. He brought it under submission like an athlete in training, fully aware that even those who preach can fall away if they fail to persevere. But what’s even more encouraging is that Paul didn’t just speak of endurance, he lived it. And near the end of his life, after decades of trials, imprisonments, beatings, betrayals, disappointments, and hardships, he could look back with unwavering confidence and say:

2 Timothy 4:6-7 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Paul was not speaking with the voice of regret, but the voice of victory. Paul never quit. He never shrank back. He did not just start the race, he finished it. And now, like the saints in Hebrews 11, his life

stands as a witness to us that it can be done. A life of enduring, persevering, God-glorifying faith is possible. The race that is set before you is doable. The race that the Lord God has set before you is doable. In your present circumstances, you are able to run, and you are able to finish the race that has been set before you.

The race set before you is not accidental or random, it has been sovereignly appointed by the Lord God. Your heavenly Father has marked out your course with infinite wisdom and knowledge, and unfailing love and compassion. He knows every step, turn, hill, valley, challenge, and season.

Psalm 139:16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

You do not run a generic race. You run your race, the one the Lord God, in His providence, goodness, and faithfulness has uniquely designed for your best, your spiritual good, and His glory. He has set it before you, and He will equip you to run it. Before you took your first breath, the Lord God had already determined the path of your race. So whatever lies ahead, whether joy or trial, ease or hardship, you can trust that the path is not only purposeful, but that Christ, by His Spirit, is with you—empowering, guiding, and sustaining you. You are not alone. Nor are you the first to run this race. Remember the heroes of Hebrews 11. Remember the heroes throughout church history. Remember the heroes of this church. This race has been run by countless other believers, and as the Lord God gave them the strength to finish, He will also give you the strength to finish it. Be encouraged, and always remember the great cloud of witnesses surrounding you. Let their faithful lives inspire you to run your race with perseverance.

Hindrances To Avoid

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

To run your race faithfully and to finish strong, you must run unhindered. That means laying aside every weight, and every sin, that slows you down. If you are to endure to the end, you cannot carry things that will hold you back. But what exactly does that mean? What are the “weights” the author speaks of? And how, practically, are we to lay them aside? The Greek word translated “weight” refers to a bulk, a burden, or a mass, something heavy that slows you down. It speaks of anything that hinders your ability to run the race: anything that distracts your focus, diverts your attention, or drains your spiritual energy. A weight is an encumbrance. It’s anything that trips you up, slows you down, or makes your running ineffective. It may not be sinful in itself, but it hinders your ability to run well. A.W. Pink remarked,

Inordinate care for the present life, and fondness for it, is a dead weight for the soul, that pulls it down when it should ascend upwards and pulls it back when it should press forwards. It is the practical duty of mortification, which is here inculcated, the abstaining from those fleshly lusts which war against the soul. The racer must be as lightly clad as possible if he is to run swiftly: all that would cumber and impede him must be relinquished. Undue concern over temporal affairs, inordinate affection for the things of this life, the intemperate use of any material blessings, and undue familiarity with the ungodly are “weights” which prevent progress in godliness. A bag of gold would be as great a handicap to a runner as a bag of lead!

In your race, good things can weigh you down just as easily as bad things. What are some things that commonly weigh us down? Take money, for example. Money itself is neither good nor bad. It can be used for good or for evil. It can help you run your race well, or it can become a burden that slows you down, depending on the grip it holds on your heart. Quite often, the best things in life are the things that can hinder our walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. Another example is success. Success in itself isn’t wrong or sinful. It can open doors to serve others and glorify the Lord God. But it can also lead to pride, self-

reliance, or distraction if we're not careful. What begins as a blessing can slowly weigh us down if it becomes our identity. It is often the things we work hardest for that are the very things that keep us from running freely toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Another example is leisure time. Rest is a gift from the Lord God, and enjoying life isn't wrong. Hobbies, entertainment, and downtime can refresh us and even draw us closer to our heavenly Father. But when leisure becomes imbalanced, as an escape or as a constant pursuit, it can dull our hunger and thirst for spiritual things. What was meant to restore us can slowly begin to rob us of our true purpose and passion. Sometimes, the things that seem most harmless are the very things that hold us back the most. Materialism and our possessions, the way we manage our time, the Internet, social media, our habits, and even our relationships, such as poor choices in friends, can all weigh us down. The truth is, it could be just about anything.

What is it that is holding you back from running the race that the Lord God has set before you? What weights are you carrying that are impeding and hindering your run? Is it a destructive habit you've struggled to break, something that once brought you comfort or enjoyment but now only chains you in guilt and shame? Is it the pressure or expectations of your family, whose voices have grown louder and stronger over the call of the Lord Jesus Christ in your life? Is it your job, where the pursuit of success and the demands of your career have slowly drained the life out of your spiritual zeal? Or perhaps it's your health, physical pain, fatigue, or a chronic illness that has discouraged your hope. Maybe your health struggle feels endless, and you wonder if you'll ever feel strong again. These types of challenges can wear down not just the body, but the spirit too, making it hard to press on. Could it be a hobby, a distraction that once seemed harmless but now consumes more of your time and affections than your responsibilities to the Lord God and His church? Maybe it's a wound left by another believer, someone you trusted who hurt you, disappointed you, or acted in hypocrisy. That kind of pain can leave a deep and lasting mark, so much so that it becomes a stumbling block in your walk with Christ.

Please hear this: Whatever it is that is slowing you down, whatever is hindering your run, whatever is impeding your forward momentum in your walk with the Lord God, lay it aside. You were never meant to carry these heavy burdens alone. In the book of Matthew, Jesus gives us this invitation:

Matthew 11:28-30 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

The Lord Jesus Christ invites you to bring every one of your burdens to Him. You are not asked to ignore your struggles, but to surrender them. In faith, lay them down at His feet. Trust Him with your pain, hurt, neglect, insecurities, confusion, and the things you cannot control or fix. The race that is set before you is yours to run, not in your own strength, but by His grace. As the Lord told Paul in:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

So let His strength carry you. Let His grace sustain you. Do not let anything weight you down or hold you back from running the race He has set before you. Lay aside every burden and cast off every weight.

But not only does excess weight hinder our performance in running, so does our sin.

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

The term sin refers to a falling away, a missing of the mark of God's perfect standard. It is any departure, however slight, from absolute obedience and submission to the Lord God. If perfection is the

bullseye, then sin is everything that misses that bullseye. Sin includes not only our external behavior, but also our internal thoughts, motives, and desires of the heart, that fail to align with the Lord God's character and purpose. Sin is not just what we do, but what we are apart from the grace of God. By nature, all men are sinful, prone to wander and rebel against the Lord God.

Notice how sin is described: "the sin which clings so closely." This phrase suggests that sin is entangling, persistent, and always near. It's not something we outgrow in this life, it remains an ever-present danger, constantly seeking to trip us up or pull us off course. Even after our conversion, the believer must deal daily with indwelling sin, which clings like a vine to the soul, wrapping itself around our hearts and squeezing our affections and desires. This is why we must not tolerate sin, but lay it aside. It must be cast off with urgency and vigilance, lest it impede our race and dull our devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sin will hinder you from running the race. It will hinder your relationship with the Lord God. Remember that sin is an offense to Him. It grieves His heart and stirs His righteous anger. God hates your sin. If you are to run the race set before you, then you must aggressively deal with your sin, all of your sins, even the ones that seem small or insignificant. Sin, no matter how subtle, slows your pace and clouds your judgment. The sooner you turn from your sin and turn to the Lord God, the sooner you can run freely, with endurance, and in step with His Spirit. J.C. Ryle remarked,

Sinful habits have long roots. Sin, once allowed to nestle in your bosom, will not be turned out at your bidding. Habits are like stones rolling downhill; the further they roll, the faster and more ungovernable is their course. Habits, like trees, are strengthened by age. A boy may bend an oak when it is a sapling; a hundred men cannot root it up when it is a full-grown tree. Custom is the nurse of sin.

Do not take your sin lightly, especially your so-called "little" sins. What seems small and harmless today, if left unchecked, will inevitably grow into something far more destructive, taking root deep within your heart and becoming harder to turn out. Do not make peace with what the Lord God hates. A quiet tolerance of sin is a slow surrender to an inevitable defeat. Sin will hinder your running, it will rob you of spiritual strength, it will steal your joy, and place you in opposition to the Lord God, who has called you to be holy. Do not delay your repentance. Though the Lord God is merciful and patient, delayed repentance will often become abandoned repentance. Sin is a slippery slope, and a heart accustomed to sin, a heart that nurtures sin, does not turn away easily. Thus, you must not hesitate, confess your sin quickly, and turn from it without delay. Do not let guilt fester or pride stall your return. The longer sin is harbored, the deeper it roots itself in your heart, and the more it blinds you to its true cost. Turn from your sin while your heart is still soft. Turn from your sin while you still can. Every moment of your delay makes repentance that much harder, not easier.

Hebrews 3:15 As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart. The invitation to grace, forgiveness, and peace is open now, not tomorrow, not later, but today. Do not miss your window of opportunity.

The Apostle Paul understood the urgency of casting off sin and every weight. He urged believers to run their race with endurance and discipline.

Philippians 3:12-14 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

In your race, the heavy weight you bear and the sin that clings so closely must be cast aside. Leave behind the past that pulls you down, and reach forward with all your strength toward what lies ahead. Press on relentlessly toward the prize, toward the finish line, the glorious, upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Paul here is making a decisive break with his past, a break from both the good and the bad. Religious achievements, good deeds, and ministry successes, as well as past sins, missed opportunities, and failures, must all be forgotten and laid aside. John MacArthur insightfully observed:

Churches are full of spiritual cripples, paralyzed by the grudges, bitterness, sins, and tragedies of the past. Others try to survive in the present by reliving past successes. They must break with the past if they are to pursue the spiritual prize. God is interested in what believers do now and in the future. 'No one,' declared Jesus, 'after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.' The clearest vision belongs to those who forget the past.

At some point in your walk with the Lord God, you may have stumbled and failed miserably. But here's the truth: your past failures do not define you, nor should they hold you back. Likewise, you may have experienced great success in your spiritual journey, but that too does not guarantee your future success or what you'll do next.

This is such an important principle: forget what lies behind, the good and the bad, and reach forward to what lies ahead. Fix your eyes on what lies ahead. The Lord God is not concerned with your past performance; He's interested in how you are running the race today and where you're headed tomorrow. So ask yourself: What are you doing for the Lord God right now? How are you running your race today? What plans are you making to finish strong?

This is why the race is so agonizing, because it is constant. The moment your pace begins to slow down or you stop running, you are no longer moving forward. Trouble and difficulty do not wait for you to catch your breath; they relentlessly close the distance, catch up, and overpower you when you hesitate. That's why we are encouraged to run with endurance the race that is set before you. The term endurance goes beyond mere persistence; it embodies a steady, unwavering determination, a deliberate and resolute commitment to keep pressing forward regardless of the challenges that arise. It means holding firm in the face of adversity, refusing to give in to fatigue or discouragement, and maintaining focus on the goal even when the path is long, dark, and difficult. Endurance is the quiet but powerful strength that enables us to continue step by step, day after day, week after week, year in and year out, without losing heart and without slowing down. F.F. Bruce remarked,

It is not some romantic thing which lends us wings to fly over the difficulties and the hard places. It is a determination, unhurrying and yet undelaying, which goes steadily on and refuses to be deflected. Obstacles do not daunt it and discouragements do not take its hope away. It is the steadfast endurance which carries on until, in the end it gets there.

Remember the great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before you, cheering you on by their faith and perseverance. Remember to lay aside every weight that slows you down and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race that is set before you.

Of course, endurance is not the only thing that is needed to successfully run and finish this race. To successfully run a strong race, you also need focus and concentration, which we'll have to cover next time.

The race set before you, your life, is not a sprint. It is a long and demanding marathon. It is marked by suffering and hardship, weariness and fatigue. But it is also filled with joy, meaning, and purpose, because your Father God, who set the course before you, walks closely alongside you with every one of your steps. You are not alone in this race. You are not the first to run it, and you will not be the last. The great cloud of witnesses, those faithful saints who have gone before us, testify with their lives that it is possible to endure and finish.

To endure and finish, you must run wisely. You must run free and unencumbered. So, lay aside the weight that is slowing you down. Cast off the sin that besets, entangles, and constricts you. Refuse to carry what the Lord Jesus Christ has already carried for you. Do not let anything, your past, your problems, your pleasures, your pursuits, or your pride, hinder your running the race that is set before you. And remember, endurance isn't about how fast you go. It's about resilience, stamina, and tenacity. It's not about never failing or falling, but about getting back up, again and again, diligently pursuing the goal, with your eyes fixed on Christ Jesus who went before you, who endured the cross for the joy set before Him.

Today, the call of God is clear: run with endurance. Press on in faith. Lay aside all that hinders. Confess and repent of what entangles. And be encouraged, the same grace that saved you is the grace that will sustain you. The same Christ who called you to run is the Christ who will carry you to the finish.

And next time, we'll look more closely at who makes it all possible, the Lord Jesus Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith. He is the One who goes before us, runs beside us, and will meet us at the finish line with the crown of life.
