

A Better Motivation

Hebrews 12:1-17

In 1978, a journalist from Philadelphia wrote about his experience running the Boston Marathon, and the point at which he (as runners often call it) ‘hit the wall’:

By now, the rigors of having run nearly twenty miles are beginning to tell. My stride has shortened. My legs are tight. My breathing is shallow and fast. My joints are becoming raw and worn. My neck aches from all the jolts that have ricocheted up my spine. Half-dollar-size blisters sting the soles of my feet. I’m beginning to feel queasy and light-headed. I want to stop running. I have ‘hit the wall.’¹

For a marathoner like Art Carey (the journalist), it takes him twenty miles before he hits the wall. For some of us, that distance is much, much less. I remember a few years back deciding that I needed to get into running. My inspiration for that was actually seeing Drew Halberstadt out for a run one day when I was driving to work. I’m driving down Rte. 30, sipping a 20-ounce soda, and there’s Drew with his earbuds in, just cruising along Lake Cochituate. And I remember thinking to myself, ‘He’s at least three miles from his house, and he’s trucking.’ And right there I said to myself, ‘I need to do that. I need to get into running.’

And so that night (I kid you not), I downloaded one of those apps that you can track your pace and record your progress; I put some music on my phone and dug out my earbuds; I did some stretches. And I plotted a course in my head through our neighborhood (what I thought was a mile and a half or so; ended up being closer to three). And I set out—for my run. To become a runner. Get into shape.

I’m going to guess that I was less than a half-mile in before I hit my wall. And I’m thinking, is it easier to turn around and go back, or to complete the loop that I plotted in my head? And I decided, ‘I’m going to push on.’ A quarter mile later, I’m realizing I really need to get new shoes if I’m going to do this. My feet are killing me. A few yards later I’m rethinking my life.

Every runner, whether expert or novice (or wannabe, like me) comes to that place where you hit the wall. Where you’re tired and discouraged, weary and fainthearted, and you just want to quit. Whether it’s the pain you’re presently experiencing, or the opposition you encounter, or the attractiveness of doing something else (everyone on the sideline looks like they’re having a whole lot more fun than I am). We get weary, discouraged, ready to quit.

And the author of Hebrews uses this very metaphor to describe the Christian life. It is “the race set before us,” which we are called to “run with endurance” and not “grow weary or

¹ Art Carey, “‘Hitting the Wall’: Beating Agony and the Marathon,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Apr. 12, 1978), as cited in R. K. Hughes, *Hebrews* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2015), 405.

fainthearted” (12:1-3). In fact, the language and imagery of weariness or faintheartedness punctuates this section (cf. v. 5: “nor be weary when reproved by him,” and “drooping hands . . . and weak knees” in v. 12).

So what will keep us running? How do we endure and not grow weary amid temptation, hostility, and pain? And what exactly does it mean for us to run with endurance—what does that pursuit look like? These are the two questions the author answers for us in our passage this morning. And he does so in three parts. The first two sections answer the question of *how*—how do we endure? What is our motivation? Namely: look to Jesus, and remember the Father’s discipline. The last section answers the question of *what*—what does it mean to endure in our pursuit of Jesus? Namely, pursue peace and holiness.

We’ll start with the first motivation, and that is: Look to Jesus.

Look to Jesus

You’ve probably already noticed that ch. 12 flows directly out of ch. 11 and the collection of inspiring stories we looked at last week. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”—that is, people like Abel and Enoch and Abraham, Sarah, and Moses—all those who have gone before us in the race and finished well, even though they’re still waiting for the ultimate prize—on that basis, he offers his main command, which is arguably the main application of the entire book: “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 . . .” (12:1). Run the race. Finish well. Persevere in faith. Hold fast to the gospel. Don’t drift, don’t fall away, don’t give up. If God was faithful to them in their race, he’ll be faithful to you too.

But then he takes this inspiration to the next level, to the highest level—the supreme example of Jesus. Verse 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. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (12:2-3).

Notice how Jesus is not just another example of faith; he’s the chief example. He is the author and perfecter, the founder and the finisher, the beginning and the end of faith. There is no greater example, not truer motivation, than to look to Jesus.

And so how did Jesus endure? What does his supreme example look like?

On the one hand, it’s easy to think that Jesus’ example is unhelpful, because he’s God and I’m not. Of course he was able to endure. That feels kind of like someone telling me on the basketball court, “Just do what LeBron does.” That’s not helpful. He’s got talent, height, and experience that I’ll never have.

But don’t forget what Hebrews has taught us about Jesus’ humanity. Yes, he’s fully God—over us and above us. Perfect, eternal, glorious, and all powerful. But he also became just like—fully human—at the same time, that he might represent us and go before us. “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all

those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (2:14-15). “He himself has suffered when tempted . . .” (2:18) “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). He really did run the race—our race. Because he knew that none of us could run it perfectly. And so he completed it for us, on our behalf. He lived a life of perfect covenant faithfulness before his Father, and gives us the credit for it when we trust in him. But more than that, his race involved taking on himself both the opposition of this world and the weight of our unholy rebellion. “He endured the cross,” ch. 12 tells us (12:2). That was also his race—dying for us—which was at the same time enduring the wrath of a godless world who wrongfully tortured, publically humiliated, and ultimately crucified him (Heb. 12:3; cf. Matt. 26–27; Isa. 50:4-6; 52:13–53:3, 7-9), *and* the wrath of God himself against our sin, as Jesus bore it in our place that God might deal justly with sin and mercifully with sinners (cf. Heb. 2:17; 9:12-14; Rom. 3:21-26; Isa. 53:4-6).

And so how did Jesus endure? What kind of example does he give us? Look again at Hebrews 12:2. “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.”

When you’re running and want to quit, it’s often because we’re focused on our circumstances. How much our feet hurt. How exhausted we are. How far behind we are, how much longer we have to go. How hard it is just to breathe right now. And when you focus on your circumstances, it’s a lot harder to find a reason to keep running.

But think of Jesus: he lived his whole earthly life in the shadow of the cross. He knew from all eternity that this was the plan—this is where the story was going. Think of growing up helping his father with carpentry; how would he not wince every time he heard the sound of a hammer striking a nail? Think of how he wrestled honestly in the garden the night he was arrested—“Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me!” Jesus knew what was coming. “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus endured (Matt. 26:29).

So how did he endure? He focused not on the horror of his situation, but on the hope of glory on the other side. On “the joy that was set before him”—the joy of resurrection from the dead, of redemption for God’s people; the joy of reconciling sinners with a holy God, of realizing all God’s promises; the joy of restoring God’s fallen world, removing sin, and renewing life forever. Jesus ran for the crown, he endured for the prize, because he knew the prize waiting was worth whatever suffering and hostility and temptation he would have to endure—the reward for his sufferings, an inheritance of nations.

And so it is for us. We too, in following Jesus’ example, are called to run with endurance our race, keeping our eye on the reward. If I’m focused on how hard my circumstances are right now—how much better others have seem to have it, how difficult it is to face the ridicule and mocking of those who oppose me, who think my faith is a joke or an excuse to be mean to others; how hard it is to say no to sin and temptation, how I just feel stuck and tired—then it’s going to be really hard to find a reason to put one foot in front of the other. But if I keep my eyes on the prize—the promise that this will end well, that God will receive the glory due his name, that there is an inheritance and a crown waiting for me in Christ—then I have reason to keep running, even when it’s hard. Even when I hit the wall.

But part of looking to Christ and following his example is getting rid of that which steals my focus and energy. Look back to v. 1—there’s something else involved in running with endurance. He says “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 . . .” Think about how hard it is to run a race carrying a burden. Every year at the Boston Marathon, there are soldiers who run it in full battle gear—50 pound packs and all. It’s impressive, but miserable. Imagine what it feels like to drop that pack and run. It’s so much easier, so much more enjoyable.

And so it is that essential to pursuing Christ is getting rid of sin. It weighs us down, it holds us back, it trips us up. We have need for repentance if we’re going to run with endurance. Of confessing our sin, turning away from it, fighting it daily, saying no to temptation, getting help and accountability to avoid it, and walking in the joy of forgiveness and freedom from guilt, that we might run with endurance and not go back. That we might run for *a prize that lasts*—that actually satisfies and gives life, rather than stealing it and taking it away. When you put sin on one side of a scale—and all the pleasure you think it will give—and Jesus on the other side, there’s no comparison. Jesus is better. We run with endurance by looking to Jesus. “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (12:3).

That’s the author’s first answer to the question of How? His second answer comes in vv. 4-11 . . .

Remember the Father’s Discipline

Even when we know that walking with Jesus is often hard, it’s still easy to get discouraged and exhausted when that hardship never seems to let up, or actually gets more intense. We’re fighting sin, we’re praying, we’re pursuing Christ—and we’re still battling depression. Or we’re still struggling financially. We’re still being marginalized by our friends, or stuck in a dead-end job, or looking for *any* job. We feel beat down by the world, and if we’re honest, a bit abandoned by God. He doesn’t exactly seem to care. If he did, why would this be so painful?

The second motivation the author gives us to help us run with endurance, is to remember that the hardship and pain that so often feels like evidence that God is ignoring us or abandoning us, is actually a sign of his love. ““For the Lord disciplines the one he loves . . .” It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons” (12:6-7).

He starts in v. 4 by gently reminding his readers that as hard as it is, it’s not as bad as it could be. Yes, they have faced intense opposition; they’ve been imprisoned, their stuff has been stolen. But, “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (v. 4). It could be worse. And even if it gets worse, that doesn’t mean God has slipped off his throne or abandoned you. *Don’t forget the exhortation that addresses you as sons.* Quoting Proverbs 3, he says, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:5-6; cf. Prov. 3:11-12). As strange as it sounds, the hardship you’re facing in your pursuit of Christ is not a sign of God’s indifference or distance, but of his love: he is disciplining us as sons and daughters.

Now we have a category for this in our human relationships, and the author of Hebrews points this out. “We have all had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them” (v. 9).

Maybe not until we were older and had kids of our own—but, we get it. Being sent to our room is hard, losing screen or being grounded is not fun. But it's good for us when we're doing something wrong and we need to learn that there are consequences for poor attitudes and behaviors. In fact, being disciplined by a parent is a mark that you truly belong to them. "For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (vv. 7-8). If there's a group of five or six kids causing trouble, and you see me getting after just one of them, what's that tell you about the one? That they belong to me—that's my child. I might gently correct others in the group, but I'm not going to punish them. I'm not going to ground them or take away screen; that's not my job. That's their parents' job. The one I punish is the one who belongs to me. Discipline is a mark of real relationship between a parent and a child.

And it's a mark of true love. It's not the only mark, but it's an essential one in raising children. If I don't discipline my kids, if they never experience any consequences for disobedience, disrespect, or doing wrong, then I'm not loving them very well. I'm setting them up for a life of failure. No concept of restraint or boundaries, no respect of others, no recognition of danger, no direction or purpose for loving or serving others. Discipline is a mark of love. Because discipline isn't about revenge or punishment; it's nurturing. It's designed to help children grow. Verse 11: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." To withhold that discipline is to cripple our children for living a meaningful and honorable life; it's to withhold true love.

And we get that when it comes to human relationships. But it's just as true in God's relationship with us. "We have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. *Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?* For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but *he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness*" (12:9-10). Sometimes the pain we experience in running our race is actually God's love, shaping us and forming us, that we might share in his holiness. That we might become more and more like him.

Kent Hughes explains that God's discipline takes three common forms.² There is *corrective discipline*, when God uses hardship to get our attention and move us to repentance. Think of Psalm 119: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. . . . It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes" (119:67, 71). Or you think of John Newton's hymn:

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!
But it has been in such a way,
As almost drove me to despair.

² These three categories, as well as the illustrating verses, come from Hughes, 398-400.

I hoped that in some favored hour,
 At once He'd answer my request;
 And by His love's constraining pow'r,
 Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
 The hidden evils of my heart;
 And let the angry pow'rs of hell
 Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
 Intent to aggravate my woe;
 Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
 Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
 Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
 "'Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
 I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ,
 From self, and pride, to set thee free;
 And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
 That thou may'st find thy all in Me."³

Sometimes what it takes to help us grow in grace and faith is coming face to face with the depths of our sin or self-reliance, being afflicted to the point that that all we have left is God, so that we can see that he truly is enough. Corrective discipline.

Second is *preventative discipline*, when God uses hardship to keep us from going down a path of sin. Think of Paul's thorn in the flesh. God gave Paul such a spectacular vision of heaven where he saw and heard things that cannot be told. "So to keep me from becoming conceited by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited" (2 Cor. 12:7). Paul's affliction was a reminder to him that God's grace was sufficient for him, that in all his incredible experiences, he had nothing to boast in other than Christ. Preventative discipline.

Third is what Hughes calls *educational discipline*, when God uses hardship to reveal himself to us. Job is a classic example of this. He did nothing wrong, yet faced unspeakable pain. A pain that his friends said was evidence of his sin and God's displeasure. But that's not at all why God took him through suffering. It was to reveal himself to him more truly. As Job reflected in ch. 42, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5). Before he faced pain, his relationship with God was like knowing a rumor. Now, through the pain, he saw God face to face.

³ John Newton, 1779.

God disciplines us for our good, that we might share in his holiness. Just because life is hard, doesn't mean God has forgotten you. For his children, your pain is in fact evidence of his love. And so it is for discipline that we have to endure. God is treating us as sons and daughters.

And this brings us to the second question the author answers, and the third portion of our passage—the question of What? What does it actually mean to run with endurance? What precisely are we pursuing? In short, the answer comes from v. 14 . . .

Pursue Peace and Holiness

If the fruit of God's loving discipline is the *peaceful* fruit of righteousness and sharing in his *holiness* (vv. 10, 11), then it makes sense that the shape of our endurance involves pursuing those two things: peace and holiness (v. 14). But before he clarifies that, he first encourages us to assume a posture of endurance.

When you hit the wall in a race, and become weary and fainthearted, your shoulders start to droop, your arms hanging at your side; your legs become heavy, sluggish, and weak. But when we are motivated to endure by looking to Christ and remembering God's loving discipline, then we need a different posture. And so the author echoes Isaiah 35 and the posture of those who enjoy God's salvation: "Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed" (Heb. 12:12-13; cf. Isa. 35:3). Chin up, chest out, arms swinging, pick up that pace, and run!

And run after peace and holiness. This is what we are striving for, v. 14: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." Holding fast to the gospel means taking a posture of peace with one another, and toward the world. Not returning the hostility we receive, but loving our enemies and offering them Christ. And it means striving to become more and more like Jesus—to pursue holiness, without which we won't actually see the Lord. How we live matters in our relationship with God.

And the author breaks that down further for us in vv. 15-17—what it looks like to strive for peace and holiness. He explains it through three instructions.⁴

First, pursuing peace and holiness *means holding fast to God's grace*. "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (v. 15). It's the grace of God in Jesus that make peace and holiness possible. Peace without grace is pretention. It's enjoying a temporary absence of conflict. Holiness without grace is legalism and self-righteousness. But holiness and peace *through* grace is biblical Christianity. Becoming more like our Savior on the basis of his finished work for us and the power of his Spirit within us. Running with endurance, pursuing holiness and peace means holding onto grace.

Second, it means *guarding against idolatry*. "See to it . . . that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled" (12:15). Now we often read this verse and think that he's warning us against letting bitterness take root in our heart. And that's an important thing to avoid. But that's not exactly what he's talking about here. Several of your

⁴ That vv. 15-17 are meant to clarify v. 14 (rather than moving onto a new subject) is evident in that "see to it" (v. 15) is a participle modifying the imperative, "strive," in v. 14.

Bible translations will put quotation marks around the phrase “root of bitterness”—that’s because he’s taking this term from Deuteronomy 29:18, where it’s a metaphor for abandoning God’s covenant and going after the gods of foreign nations.

Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' . . . (Deut. 29:18-19)

Running with endurance means holding fast to God, all the way to the end. The temptation to recraft God in our own image, or mix and match deities to suit our own needs or wants, or to become more attractive or compelling to others, will not just hurt you, it will cause many to be defiled. Others who are influenced by you. It destroys both peace and holiness. It’s like straying out of your lane in a race; your drifting impacts other runners, who often get tangled up and crash with you. And so we must guard against idolatry—treating other things as God, or redefining God—lest we fall down and take others with us.

Finally, running with endurance in our pursuit of holiness and peace means *focusing our appetites on eternal things, not worldly and temporary ones*. Verse 16: “See to it . . . that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” (12:16-17).

It’s so easy, especially when we’re discouraged or fatigued, to look for the closest and most expedient solution. Esau, clear back in Genesis 25, came in from the field exhausted, and counted a bowl of soup as more valuable than his inheritance. He gave it up for a single meal, and was then surprised and angry later on when he couldn’t have it. It’s like an athlete who dopes in order to win one race, and later complains when he loses his entire career.

The same thing happens today when we treasure our own appetites more than Christ—whether our sexual appetite, or material appetite, or physical appetite. Which doesn’t mean we deprive ourselves like monks or ascetics. The question is who’s serving whom? Do our appetites serve us, or do we serve them? And how are we satisfying them? In a godly way or a godless one? When we live to find our satisfaction in what this world can give us, not only will be disappointed by what it gives, we end up forfeiting what is greater and eternal. Running with endurance, striving for peace and holiness, means focusing our appetites on eternal things, not worldly and temporary ones.

Because we have a better reward waiting, as we talked about last week. There is a joy set before us, a better motivation, that makes our race worth enduring. When you hit the wall, when you’re tempted to give up or check out, look to Jesus, remember your Father’s loving discipline—he is treating you as sons—and keep striving for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. He’s worth it.