

# The Christian Marathon

*A Bible Study on Hebrews 12:1-13*

**Study** Bible Studies Not stated

Hebrews 12:1-13

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*Christ Church, Noida — The Bible Study Series Scripture Reference:  
Hebrews chapter 12, verses 1 to 13*

## Preamble

The writer of this epistle continues with his exhortations to his audience, the Jewish Christians. They were showing clear signs of moving away from the Gospel they had once accepted, towards a more conservative Jewish Christianity. Some faced pressure to alter their Christian beliefs to be more reflective of Judaism in order to gain acceptance from their social groups. This meant a mixing of Old Testament law and the Gospel, which they thought would be more acceptable to their Jewish society and would offer some protection from Roman persecution, though there is no evidence that their persecution extended to bloodshed.

The author has argued his case very passionately and systematically in favour of faith in Jesus Christ. He has used every possible argument to impress upon his audience that Jesus Christ is the only way forward. In doing so he has deployed, as we have seen, from chapter one through to chapter eleven, several methods. In chapter eleven he gave many illustrious instances and examples of Old Testament heroes of faith. He made use of this cloud of "witnesses," as he calls them, to engage the Hebrews to drop their unbelief, and to run with faith and patience the race set before them, keeping just one goal in sight — Jesus Christ.

As we were reminded last week, these heroes of faith, though highly commended for their unwavering faith, are yet to receive what was promised — the eternal life. They are waiting in the wings, as God has better plans for all believers, and they too would be made perfect with us.

Let us now move on to the study of chapter twelve, verses one to thirteen.

## The Outline

Chapter twelve is all about the endurance of faith. We will discuss the verses in three parts:

1. The race of faith, as exemplified by Jesus Christ (verses 1 to 3)

2. Exhortation to endure God's chastening (verses 4 to 11)
3. Renewal of spiritual vitality (verses 12 and 13)

## 1. The Race of Faith

*1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.*

A great cloud of witnesses has primary application to the imposing list of Old Testament heroes detailed in the preceding chapter. The metaphor of a great athletic contest gives rise to an erroneous understanding that these witnesses correspond to spectators, as some commentators have argued. It is hard to believe that the inspired writer intends to say that the departed faithful actually see and know all that subsequent generations do. What a frightening thought.

The Greek word for "witnesses" is *martus*. It is used thirty-four times in the New Testament, and is used in the context of one giving testimony — testimony regarding faith in God. These witnesses surround us with the testimony of faith. It is like wise people who, embarking upon a new adventure, consult others who have previously been on a similar adventure. The term "witness" is, therefore, a figurative expression, like Napoleon telling his army in Egypt, "Soldiers, forty centuries are looking down on your deeds today."

The analogy brought forward in this exhortation is between a foot race, such as those seen in the Olympics, and the race of life. Incidentally, this type of comparison was used a number of times by Paul, and the appearance of Paul's favourite metaphor in this epistle could be one of the reasons some thought the epistle was authored by him.

Verse one speaks of the race we as Christians are required to run, demanding the same intensity of discipline an athlete would need in a long-distance race. It means we should better get on with it. We should strip down and start running and never quit — no extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins to slow us down.

There are two classes of impediment to be avoided by the successful contender in the race of life. The first of these is "weight," as mentioned here. This class of hindrance includes just about anything that can get in the way, or impede the Christian contender's progress — things not

bad at all in themselves, but which, in the ultimate analysis, would hinder progress and must be cast aside or dealt with. Just as the runner in a race travels as lightly as possible, the Christian must avoid being weighed down with all kinds of worldly duties and commitments. Today the Christian "mind space" is occupied by career and family dynamics, holiday planning, political affiliations, boards of directors, governing committees, kitty parties, bridge clubs, golf clubs, the Parent-Teacher Association, and a list of associations for almost every conceivable purpose. And in these times of information-technology overdose, we have to deal with mobile telephones, the internet, and virtual communities to top it all. But whatever one's views about any or all such things, one fact is certain: no person can do all that and be a good Christian too.

The sin which doth so easily beset us is the second class of hindrance the Christian contender must avoid. It refers to conduct inherently unrighteous, which is always a mortal enemy of faith. Nowhere else in the New Testament is the word equivalent to "easily besets" to be found, and various views of what is meant by the expression have been advanced. The word from which this modifier of "sin" comes is similar to the word "circumstance," denoting something that surrounds. The well-circumstanced sin has everything in its favour — time, place, and opportunity. If a paraphrase may be ventured, perhaps it means, "Lay aside the sin that is always so conveniently close to us."

In verse two we must understand that in the race we run, the finishing line is Jesus Christ. He began and finished this race before us. The author wants us to study how Jesus did it. Jesus never lost sight of where He was headed — that exhilarating finish in and with God. Jesus did put up with everything that came along the way: the cross, the shame, whatever it was. And now He is there, in the place of honour, right alongside God. When we find ourselves flagging in our faith, the author tells us to go over our Lord's story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility He ploughed through. That will shoot the necessary stimulant into our souls.

Christians must run the race not as a casual stroll, but as a race — a difficult struggle, something like an obstacle race. The word for "race" in Greek is *agona*, meaning struggle or anguish. The race of life is an agonising, demanding course and requires Christian endurance if one is to win. "Patience," then, is not merely sitting around and waiting until something happens. It means endurance and the power of determination, including the ability to finish what is begun.

The metaphor comparing the Christian life to a race has the following biblically supported analogies:

(1) The contender must be legally enrolled in a contest in order to win: the Christian must contend lawfully by belonging to the church and

accepting the full obligations of Christian service. In 2 Timothy 2:5 we read: "And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully."

(2) Some win and some do not. In 1 Corinthians 9:24 it is stated: "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain."

(3) For the contender in an athletic contest, discipline is an absolute precondition for success; the Christian runner, too, must lay aside every weight and the ever-convenient sin in order to win, as we have already discussed in verses one and two.

(4) Patience is required of both the athlete and the Christian, endurance being necessary to win in both cases.

(5) The winner is rewarded — the earthly contender with a perishable reward, the Christian with an eternal reward. We read in 1 Corinthians 9:25: "And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible."

(6) The comparison becomes a contrast in the matter of how many may win. In the earthly contest, only one receives the prize; but in the heavenly contest, every participant will receive the prize, since victory does not depend upon any relationship between one participant's achievement and that of the fellow contestants. If you run well, you may win; if all run well, all may win.

In verse three the writer cautions good Christians against sinners, or "gainsayers" as some translations put it, like the ones who confronted Jesus Christ. Those who resort to gainsaying are among the most disgraceful of humanity; for, having no faith of their own, they resort to all kinds of pettiness, quibbling, murmuring, complaining, and questioning regarding the faith of others. They take recourse to a depraved assault upon the faith of others, not hesitating to distort, misrepresent, pervert, or deny the most sacred truth, in efforts to gain their unworthy objectives.

They maliciously contradicted Jesus. The record of our Lord's patient endurance of their slanderous and shameful opposition is a source of encouragement for those of any age who must deal with the cunning deceit of gainsayers. Remember, in the final analysis, their action boils down simply to wearing the believer out, causing him to faint and fall on the way. The writer is warning Christians against fainting during the race of life they run.

## **2. Exhortation to Endure God's Chastening**

*4 Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. 5 And ye*

*have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. 7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? 8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. 9 Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. 11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.*

The sufferings of Christ, even unto death, are here contrasted with the sufferings of the Hebrews, and the interjection of the word "yet" in verse four appears to be the bluntest kind of warning that such a dreadful experience may indeed be waiting for them, just ahead.

Addressed to the second generation of Hebrew Christians, this epistle would gain deeper significance in calling to remembrance the first-generation martyrs, by the reminder that its readers had not yet crowned their faith after the example of Stephen and James. Of Stephen we read in Acts 22:20: "And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him." And of James we read in Acts 12:1-2: "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword."

Verses five and six are a quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12, and it is applied forcefully to all citizens of the new institution. The exhortation, at this point, takes a new turn. The writer had just been speaking of the fact that they had not been required to seal their faith with their blood; but now he stresses that even the hardships and sufferings which they did experience, far from being anything unusual, were exactly what they should have expected. He then charges them with having forgotten that the sufferings of Christians are grounded in the benevolent purpose of God, who imposes upon his children the kind of chastening that will strengthen and correct them. The doctrine of the chastening of God is neglected today, and it is likely that some have scarcely heard of it; but, of course, it is a valid teaching of the Scriptures, both Old Testament and New Testament, and the knowledge of it in Christian hearts can be a source of glorious light on many a dark day.

The chastening of sons by their fathers, spoken of in verses seven and

eight, has gone out of style in the current generation; and had these lines been addressed to the present age, they might well have been reversed: "What son is it whom his father does chasten?" Our age is the loser in the abandonment of a principle as old as humanity, and which carries the sanction of divine approval. The nature of God's discipline is explicit in the diversity of troubles and sorrows that are imposed by the Lord upon His children, usually in the sense that He allows such things to befall them, with the holy and benevolent intention of improving the quality of their spiritual lives.

An Old Testament example is Job, who suffered the loss of wealth, loved ones, reputation, health, and honour, all upon the specific permission of God. It is, therefore, a mistake for the Christian to view tribulation with a sense of indifference, or to consider it the result of blind chance, or the operation of the law of averages. There is an eternal purpose of God towards His children, and that purpose is personal and corrective. The full nature of it is revealed in that it wears many faces, appearing and reappearing in an infinite pattern of sorrows and hardships. It is the experience of all of God's children, there being no exceptions whatever. Its absence denotes no favouritism on the part of God, but the illegitimacy of the one seemingly favoured. The chastening of Israel showed "wounds and bruises." We read in Isaiah 1:5-6: "Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment."

And the true Christian bears in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus. We read in Galatians 6:17: "From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."

Hebrews 12:7-11 is actually a commentary on Proverbs 3:11-12, and coming from the pen of inspiration, the light shed on this subject is most helpful. In verse nine, the contrast is between the fathers of our bodies and the Father of our spirits. If a dutiful child submits patiently to the discipline of his earthly parents, although he has derived only his body from them, how much more submissively should we bear the divine corrections, seeing that they proceed from Him from whom alone we have received our spiritual and immortal nature.

The punishment imposed by earthly parents, discussed in verse ten, is at best subject to error and to its admixture with impulse, anger, and other elements of parental shortcoming; but the chastening of God is never unreasonable, never more than the child of God can bear. Let us look at 1 Corinthians 10:13: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." Further, it is

never imposed from any unworthy motive on the part of God. It is solely for the profit and ultimate holiness of the recipient.

Several things appear in verse eleven. The chastening of God is not expected to be a pleasant or delightful experience, but a grievous one, its purpose being to exercise the believer by forcing him to adapt to straitened, dangerous, risky, painful, sorrowful, or discouraging circumstances. And the ultimate purpose is the ennoblement of our spiritual life, the strengthening of character, and the enhancing of the prospect of eternal life. The most wonderful people on earth are those who have passed through the chastening experiences of life, whose faith, love, understanding, and sympathy are grounded in the true love of God, and whose lives, as a result, have been expanded and beautified.

### 3. Renewal of Spiritual Vitality

*12 Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; 13 And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.*

Here, once more, as throughout the first eleven verses of this chapter, the image of the great Olympian contest is the vision in the author's mind; thus the limp, relaxed hands and the palsied knees of verse twelve bring to mind a boxer who is out on his feet, or a runner who is about to falter in the race. See Isaiah 35:3, which has nearly this same language: "Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees."

We know that in the race of life our goal is Jesus Christ, and the reward is the glorious salvation He has promised. Therefore there is no room for fatigue or relaxation.

"Make straight paths for your feet," in verse thirteen, again suggests the language of Isaiah 35:4, and is a reference to the encouragement of the weak and faltering by smoothing the way before them. It is the stronger members of the believing community who are to do this, or at least to take the lead in it. In view of the difficulties and temptations through which all must pass, every Christian should be concerned with removing obstacles, in every way possible, from the course of his fellow believers. Perhaps, if their paths are made straight, even the lame, the feeble, and the injured may yet press on to victory. The tenderness of these lines is really moving.

### Application

The way shown by our Lord is not a bed of roses; yet as He ran the race to the end, keeping in sight the glory of God and God's will, brushing aside the persecution, the cross, and the shame He suffered, He gives

us an example we should always keep in mind.

Every Christian should get started and run this race to the finish, the finishing line being Jesus Christ.

It is necessary to deal with all the worldly compulsions and the ever-present sin, to make ourselves light for the marathon we run.

God will chasten His loved and favoured ones, putting them through a vigorous test of discipline and tribulation, to strengthen and prepare them spiritually to receive salvation. Certainly, God does not intend, in a spiritual sense, that His children shall approach the ultimate goal without the advantage of the corrective blessing of heavenly discipline.

All must pass through difficulties and temptations, and every Christian should be concerned with removing obstacles, in every way possible, from the course of his fellow believers.

Are we ready to bear the marks of Jesus Christ on our bodies?

Amen.