

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ

SERMON: **No Pain, No Gain**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 12:1-13

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Many word pictures are used in the Bible to describe the adventure that is the Christian life. It is spoken of in agricultural terms (planting and harvesting), military terms (fighting the good fight), stewardship terms (faithful management), and even slavery terms (we are bondslaves to God), but no word picture is used more frequently or effectively than that of the athlete, and particularly the runner.

The author of Hebrews follows up his brilliant exhibition of God's great heroes in the Hall of Faith (which we spent the whole month of March studying) with a challenge for us in chapter 12 to imitate their faith as we run the race that is marked out for us.

Only he doesn't deceive us the way a lot of running advocates do today. Josh told us last week about a health tip to the effect that running will prevent death, and he appropriately put that rumor to bed. But I've actually had people tell me that running is fun and that if I'd do it for a few months I'd come to the point that I'd get a real high from it and my body would crave more. Well, back in 1983—I remember it well—I decided to give that a try. (I had always hated to run, even when I was a kid. I liked to walk, climb, ski, swim, ride a bike, play tennis—almost anything except running).

But if it were true that running could actually become exhilarating, I was willing to give it a try. So I ran. For six months I ran at least three times a week, usually two miles a day. I'm here to tell you that it was all a dirty Communist lie. I never *once* enjoyed running. I never got a *single* high. My body *never* craved anything but rest. But, even though I hated it and eventually quit, even I had to admit that some good came from my brief training. I got some much-needed exercise, I lost a little weight, my stamina increased, and I generally felt better.

The author of Hebrews calls upon us to run the race that is the Christian life, but he doesn't promise us a high, nor does he tell us we will eventually crave the running. In fact, he is honest enough to tell us the race involves considerably more pain than pleasure. But he tells us to do it anyway and makes it clear that some immeasurable value will accrue to the runner—benefits attainable in no other way. To put it in modern terms, his motto is, “No pain, no gain.” Please turn with me to Hebrews 12:1-13.

*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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him 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 sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

*In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your*

*blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:  
 "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,  
 and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,  
 because the Lord disciplines those he loves,  
 and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."*

*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

*Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

### **Nature of the Race (1)**

There are several different words in the Greek language which are translated “race” in English. The author of Hebrews chooses the term “agona” in verse 1. We get our English word “agony” from it. (Clearly he agrees with me about the nature of running!) Of course, he is not talking about leisurely jogging for two miles three times a week but rather a marathon race that is demanding and grueling.

Furthermore, he tells us this is not a race of our own choosing, but rather “the one marked out for us.” Someone else is setting the boundaries and the distance, namely God. This hints at two facts: this race is not optional for the committed believer, and everyone’s race is different. The goal is the same, but the route and the distance are unique to the individual.

### **Motivation for the Race (1)**

One of the greatest possible motivations for running this race is knowing someone who has been through what we're about to face and has survived, even triumphed! That's why the passage opens this way, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses ...”

Who are these witnesses? Well, he’s talking about the great heroes of faith mentioned in chapter 11—people like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, David, Samuel.

What are they doing? Well, some commentators have pictured them as filling the stands of the Olympic Stadium like spectators, cheering us on. But they are more than spectators; they are witnessing to us. They are saying, in effect, “We've been where you are. Keep trusting and never give up, no matter what the obstacles or hardship or cost!” They're not saying these things verbally; rather they are witnessing through their stories. One of the reasons I love the OT (and love preaching from the OT) is the great encouragement available from reading about the lives of

these heroes. (In fact, when our study of Hebrews is completed in three weeks we are planning to dig deeply into the lives of a couple of OT heroes—Ruth and Esther. That’s just to whet your appetite).

### **Preparation for the Race (1)**

No one runs well without preparation and training. And preparation starts with getting rid of any and every impediment that might handicap the runner. “Let us throw off everything that hinders...” Excess weight is one such impediment. You know, sometimes athletes purposely add weights while they are training. Basketball players sometimes wear ankle weights and baseball players swing lead bats. They wear sweat suits while warming up. But they wouldn’t think of taking such equipment into a game. Runners particularly are conscious of discarding every ounce of weight in their shoes and their clothes.

Now in the spiritual race that God calls us to run, the weight that hinders us is not always something bad; in fact, it may be something perfectly innocent and harmless in and of itself. But if it weighs us down, diverts our attention, saps our energy, and dampens our enthusiasm for the things of God, then we may need to dispense with it, or at least get it back in balance. For some people sports may be such a hindrance, or television, or hobbies or possessions. Thoreau wrote about “men staggering along the road with acres of land on their backs, and houses strapped to them, and bags of money.” For others their attitudes may be a hindrance, attitudes like perfectionism, greed, procrastination, apathy, or simply lack of discipline.

I suspect it’s even possible for spiritual activities like going to Bible studies and listening to Christian radio to cause obesity in a Christian’s life and slow them down. After all, if one is always at the spiritual feeding trough and never exercising—never giving out—isn’t it likely one will gain weight?

But in addition to excess weight, there is an even more serious hindrance that must be dealt with in preparation for the race, and that is “the sin that so easily entangles.” Obviously all sin hinders Christian living, and the reference here may be to sin in general. But the Greek doesn’t say “sin” but rather “*the* sin.” That would incline me toward one of two interpretations. First, it may mean the sin that entangles a particular individual. That is not the same for everyone, you know, but all of us have some besetting sin that we struggle with, sometimes for years.

Or he could be talking about *the* sin that has been the primary focus of chapters 10-12, i.e. the sin of unbelief. It causes some to quit the race before reaching the finish line, others to change course to make it more palatable. Unbelief says, God, I don’t like the race you have set before me—too many obstacles. I need a different spouse so I can be really happy; I need a different job so I can be fulfilled; I need a different body so I can have self-esteem or decent health; or I need a different church—one that meets my particular preferences. I need, I need, I need often represents the sin of unbelief that so easily entangles.

### **Focus of the Race (2)**

In track, as in most sports, where the runner looks is extremely important. Nothing will throw off his stride or slow him down like looking at his feet, or at the runner coming up from behind, or at the crowds in the stands. The Christian runner must keep focused if he is to stay on course, and verse two tells us exactly where that focus must be: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith ...” I think the author uses the human name, Jesus, rather than Christ or Son of God, to emphasize his humanity, particularly his endurance of pain, humiliation, and the disgrace of the cross.

Let me ask a simple question: To what extent are we fixing our eyes on Jesus? Frankly, some Christians have their eyes fixed on themselves; preoccupied with their own comfort, health, wealth, careers, retirement, etc.

Some have their eyes fixed on others. It’s easy to compare or contrast ourselves to those around us, resulting in feelings of either inferiority or pride. Or to become busybodies, trying to play God in other people’s lives. Remember Peter in John 21? When told by Jesus that he would become a martyr, he pointed to his fellow-Apostle John and said, “But Lord, what about him?” And Jesus said, “If I want him to remain alive until the Second Coming, what’s that to you. *You follow Me!*”<sup>i</sup>

Practically speaking, how do we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus? Well, we fix our eyes on Jesus when we read and study His Word regularly and communicate with Him in prayer. And when we walk with Him on a daily basis, asking continually, “What would He do if He were in my shoes? How would He respond to this trial?” And when we long for the day we will be with Him, eager to enjoy the home that He is preparing for us.

I remember when my dad taught me to drive, one of the hardest things I had to learn was to keep my eyes focused way down the road. I wanted to look at where the hood of the car met the road, because that's where I was headed next. But eventually I learned that taking the long view is the safest way to drive.

Have you ever wondered how farmers are able to make the corn rows absolutely straight? (Well, frankly today they cheat; they use GPS units mounted on their air conditioned tractors while they listen to their Bose sound systems). But the way they used to do it is to fix their eyes on a particular point way off in the distance, and when they did that they could plow or plant a straight row. Taking the long view is not only the safest way to drive and the best way to plant a straight row, it is also the only way for a Christian to run the race. Fix your eyes on Jesus!

And *why* is Jesus the perfect focus for the Christian runner? Because He is “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Some texts call him the pioneer and finisher, indicating that he spans the whole gamut of the salvation story. He is the *alpha and omega*, the beginning and the end. That is, He created us for fellowship in the Garden of Eden, and though we fell into sin He gave His life on the cross to restore us to that fellowship.

And what motivated such an amazing sacrifice on Jesus' part? Not pity, not altruism, not victimhood, but "joy." "Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The thrill of saving us from our sin and seeing us restored to fellowship with Him motivated Him to endure suffering. To scorn shame is not to ignore it but to deem it inconsequential in view of the ultimate result it leads to, which is enthronement at His Father's right hand.

I'm sure glad Jesus Himself took the long view. Our entire salvation and our destiny for all of eternity hinged upon His willingness to endure the pain and finish the race, for when He died on the cross He paid the penalty for all our sin and set us free. That is why we should fix our eyes on Jesus and be willing ourselves to endure suffering in view of the ultimate prize.

### **Attitude in the Race (1,3,4)**

We are exhorted here in Hebrews 12:1 to run with an attitude of perseverance or endurance. The KJV reads "patience" but it is not the kind of patience which sits down and accepts things as they are (after all the person is *running* with patience). It is a determination to push ahead and refuse to be distracted. Obstacles do not daunt an attitude of perseverance, and discouragements do not take away its hope.

There have been many times in the history of sports when the strongest did not win the boxing match, when the best athletes did not win the basketball game, and when the fastest did not win the race, but rather the one who endured. What baseball fan will ever forget the 1988 World Series when a cripple named Kirk Gibson, who couldn't have made it to first on a single to centerfield grabbed a bat and hit one of the greatest walk-off home runs in baseball history. It was sheer determination, guts galore.

In the 1992 Summer Olympics British runner Derek Redmond tore a hamstring during the 400-meter semifinal. He fell to the track but struggled to his feet and began to hobble, determined to complete the race. His father ran from the stands to help him off the track, but the athlete refused to quit. He leaned on his father, and the two limped to the finish line together, to deafening applause. A father helping a fallen son limp across the finish line is the quintessential picture of the Christian life.

The alternative to endurance is to "grow weary and lose heart," which is exactly what we are warned against in verse 3. Maybe you're at the point today where you feel you've endured enough and you're thinking about throwing in the towel. Well, the author of our passage chides his parishioners a bit in verse 4: "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." They had seen persecution and suffering, but not martyrdom, like some of those in the Hall of Faith. Now I must admit, that doesn't sound too compassionate or sensitive. He says in effect, "What are you complaining about? You're not bleeding all over the floor!"

I think he is addressing the fact that we tend to exaggerate our trials and temptations, to consider them monumental, even when they aren't. Think back to the last time you came totally unglued.

For some it may have been on the way to church this morning. Was the trial you were experiencing really worth quitting the race over? Will you even remember it five months from now? Just compare what you are going through to the suffering of brothers and sisters around the world today. Persecution, you know, is not just ancient history! There have been more martyrs for the Christian faith in the past century than all of history previously. The question is, “Can we remain faithful in the face of lesser suffering?” Our attitude should be one of endurance.

### **Discipline for the Race (5-11)**

Please understand that our author is not talking here about the discipline the runner exercises as he practices and trains. That’s a legitimate subject and one that Paul addresses in several of his letters. Rather he is addressing the discipline that God brings to bear on the runner. The recipients of this letter were undergoing significant pressure and persecution because of their faith. While they hadn’t shed their blood yet, the race was getting tough and they were beginning to lose heart and say, “Enough already!” What they were failing to take into consideration is that their trials were not haphazard or random, but part of a larger picture painted by God Himself. Their trials constituted divine discipline.

Now there are two perils we can fall prey to when we experience divine discipline, and verse five addresses both.

**Perils related to discipline.** The author paraphrases Proverbs 3:11-12, where we it says, “My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke.” He interprets that to mean, “Do not make light of and do not lose heart.” We “make light” of discipline when we fail to see it as discipline but instead treat it “bad luck.” Or when we act like a stoic—“my head is bloody but unbowed.” But the other peril is very real too, namely “losing heart.” Sometimes we become so overwhelmed by our problems that we become despondent, depressed, and just give up.

The reason we must avoid these twin perils is given in verse 6: “because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” This introduces the ... :

#### **Purposes of discipline: There are two primary ones:**

- 1. It proves God's love. (6)**
- 2. It proves we are His children. (7-9)**

I don’t like the NIV translation “punishes” there in verse 6. The ESV uses the term “chastises,” which is much better. To punish implies something punitive, while the context here is one of love. God *punishes* the wicked but He *disciplines* His children. Granted, discipline is often painful, but it is always corrective, never punitive.

Our tendency is to see pain and suffering and trials as evidence that God doesn't care. But they are, in fact, proof of the exact opposite. To demonstrate this, the author uses the analogy of human fathers. “For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined then you

are someone else's children and not true sons.”<sup>ii</sup>

C. S. Lewis makes this point so well in his amazing book, *The Problem of Pain*.

*It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy (fools). ... If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all the records, that though He has often rebuked us and condemned us, He has never regarded us with contempt. He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.*

He then commences a profound discussion of four biblical analogies of love. I will mention only two for the sake of time. The love which an artist feels for an artefact is one used often in the Scripture, as it speaks of the Potter and the clay and the Builder and the stones. An artist may not take much trouble with a sketch made idly to amuse a child. But when working on his *magnum opus* he will take endless trouble. One can imagine that if that painting were alive, after being rubbed and scraped and restarted for the tenth time, it might well wish that it were only a thumb-nail sketch. But then it would be wishing not for more love but for less. And when it is finished, hanging in an art gallery, temperature and humidity controlled, being admired by thousands, it would thank the artist for the pain it had to endure in order to enjoy its destiny.

A second analogy is the love of a person for an animal. This is also Scriptural, as the Bible speaks of the Good Shepherd and His sheep. Sheep were often pets in that day, but it is easier for us to relate to a dog. In its natural state a dog has certain smells and habits which frustrate man's love, so he washes it, house-breaks it, trains it, and even sometimes puts a device around its neck to shock it when it gets to the invisible fence we have put up around the yard. To the puppy as theologian the whole process must seem to cast grave doubts on the goodness of his owner. But the full-grown dog—bathed, healthy, well-fed, loved by the family and sitting by the hearth on a cold winter's night—would have no such doubts.

So also, when children are growing up they don't always take kindly to the discipline of their parents. In fact, they have been known to despise it and yell, “You must hate me!” after being grounded for some offense. But when fully grown, having been trained morally so as to survive their teen years without going to jail or becoming chemically dependent or bearing children out of wedlock, and having learned sufficient social skills to function as a contributing member of society, and having obtained a decent job and started a family of their own, they generally look back on Father's Day and say, “Thanks Dad, even for the discipline.”<sup>iii</sup>

Friends, the problem of reconciling divine discipline with divine love, is only insoluble when we attach a trivial meaning to the word “love.” When Christianity says that God loves us, it means He *really loves us*, not that He is a celestial Santa Claus willing to settle for our temporary happiness at the expense of our eternal well-being.<sup>iv</sup>

**Benefits of discipline. (10-11)** First, there is life. He says in verse 10: “Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it (maybe not at the time, but eventually). How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!”

Rebelling against the commandments of God can cost you your life. Just think of the natural consequences of sin! So God disciplines us to draw us back to conformity with His commandments. However, the reference to “life” here is probably more to the quality of life than length of it. When we are subject to the Father of our spirits we will have a richer, more abundant life. Not a trouble-free life, not necessarily a life of ease and luxury, but an abundant life. Just as in gardening, the discipline of pruning produces greater fruitfulness.

A second benefit of God's discipline is holiness. Look at verse 10: “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” I assume most fathers do their best to rear their children to become mature adults with high moral standards. But sometimes we fail. Our discipline is inconsistent at times, sometimes inappropriate; and it may even backfire. But we never have to worry about God's discipline being inconsistent or inappropriate. He always disciplines us perfectly, with our ultimate good in mind, and with the goal of producing holiness in us. And the implication is that there is no other way to achieve such an end.

Then in verse 11 a third benefit of discipline is mentioned: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” That “later on” is our problem, for we are impatient creatures and we readily accept pain only if the relief comes right away. We accept the pain a dentist causes when he does a root canal because we know it will quickly bring relief from the toothache. God's discipline also produces relief, namely righteousness (i.e. right living) and peace (a settled calmness that God is in control), but it does not always come immediately; sometimes it is later on.

### **Encouragement for the Race (12-13)**

“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.” Feeble arms and weak knees speak of low spirits or even sheer exhaustion. Are you there right now? Do you have family problems that seem insurmountable? Have you been unemployed for months, or even years? Are there financial obligations that seem overwhelming? Is there a habit you can't seem to break and is about to destroy you? Have you started to doubt whether God is really cares about what you're going through? Find strength in God, then strengthen each other.

Also he says, “Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled but rather healed.” Running a race on an uneven path full of bumps and potholes is not only inconvenient but also dangerous, especially for someone who is feeble and weak already. So he calls on them to follow the Lord's level path of holiness so that their current spiritual condition will result in healing rather than further disability.<sup>v</sup>

**Conclusion:** Friends, did you catch the words of Andrae Crouch's song which Jim Logan imposed over the Derek Redmond video? Can you say them with conviction?

*I've had many tears and sorrow, I've had questions for tomorrow,  
There've been times I didn't know right from wrong;*

*But in every situation God gave blessed consolation  
That my trials come to only make me strong.*

*I thank God for the mountains, And I thank Him for the valleys,  
I thank Him for the storms He brought me through;  
For if I'd never had a problem I wouldn't know that He could solve them,  
I'd never know what faith in God could do.*

*Through it all, through it all,  
I've learned to trust in Jesus, I've learned to trust in God.  
Through it all, through it all, I've learned to depend upon His Word.*

Benediction: Col. 1:10-14

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- i. We can also fix our eyes on others in the sense of idolizing them and putting them on a pedestal. This too can cause us to stumble because people *will* inevitably disappoint us.
  - ii. All of us have at times **wanted** to discipline a neighbor's child. I tried it once—big mistake! I had one angry father on my case! Normally we don't discipline other kids because we have no right to do so, and because we don't really care that much. If they want to be delinquents, that's fine, just so they stay out of our yard.
  - iii. C. S. Lewis summarized it this way: "A man may *say*, 'I love my son but don't care how great a fool he is provided he has a good time,' but he could mean nothing by saying it."
  - iv. "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world" C. S. Lewis, *The problem of Pain*, 81.
  - v. This message can be summarized with three concepts that overlap with the Christian life.
    1. Some things in life must be rejected if we are to run effectively.
    2. The Christian life, like a long-distance run, is difficult, and therefore takes sustained effort.
    3. If we are to live for God in a faithful manner, a focus on Christ and on our relationship with Him are paramount.