

## Hebrews 12:1-3 "When Life Gets Hard" \*\*

Proposition: According to Hebrews 12:1-3, when life gets hard we must devote ourselves to two responsibilities.

I. When life gets hard, we must run (1).

A. The race involves a crowd (1a).

1. Others have finished the race.

2. We can do the same.

B. The race involves a strategy (1b).

1. Get rid of all hindrances.

2. Get ready for hardship.

3. Stay on the course.

II. When life gets hard, we must remember (2-3).

A. Remember who Jesus is (2a).

1. He's the One who started the race.

2. He's the One who will finish it.

B. Remember what Jesus did (2b).

1. He focused on future joy.

2. He endured the cross.

3. He despised shame.

4. He received His reward.

C. Remember how much Jesus suffered (3).

1. We'll never suffer as much as He did.

2. We'll never give up as long as we remember Him.

Implications: We learn some lessons about suffering...

1. Suffering has a limit.

2. Suffering has a purpose.

3. Suffering is a way to please our Father and identify with our Savior.

This past week I spent some time reflecting on an event that I've observed several times in my life. I saw it happen once at our kitchen table. It happened another time while I was sitting in an easy chair in someone's living room. On yet another occasion I was standing by a hospital bed.

As I continued to reflect, I recalled seeing it several times across the desk in my study. It's happened in this very room, too. And each time the event occurred, my heart rejoiced!

You can probably guess what the event was. Some of the most thrilling moments in my life occurred when God privileged me to watch His Spirit perform the miracle of new birth.

It's exhilarating to see people come to know Jesus Christ! One moment the person is a sinner, separated from God. The next moment he's a regenerated, cleansed, child of God! Whereas moments before the person was weighted down with the heavy load of sin, in a moment's time he's set free from his sin and reconciled to God.

I've seen people cry. At other times I've seen them beam with amazement. Quite often people will say to me, "Pastor, I feel like a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Wow! What a great feeling!"

And it is. Can you relate? Do you know for sure that God has forgiven your sins and given you new birth?

Those first days, weeks, and even months are thrilling for the new Christian. It's like you're walking on cloud nine. The sky seems bluer, the grass greener, and the future brighter. You think about heaven and ponder what it will be like to see Jesus. And you want the whole world to know what He did for you.

But as time passes, there's something that inevitably occurs. The feelings begin to wane. Oh, you still love Jesus, and you're still amazed at what He did for you. But you begin to observe something that perplexes you.

It's this. Life is still hard. In fact, in some ways life gets even harder for the Christian because now you're in a battle. You have three enemies that war against your soul—the world, the flesh, and the devil. And the temptation to go back to the old ways is ever present.

Is it easy to be a *biblical* Christian (I use the term "biblical" because not all who call themselves "Christian" are indeed *biblical* Christians—some are cultural Christians)? The answer is no.

The truth is, if we profess allegiance to Jesus Christ and acknowledge that He alone is Lord, we are asserting something that's very offensive to a society that promotes tolerance and pluralism. Even religious people will attack us, and call us things like "radical" and "narrow-minded."

And we may get weary and discouraged. We may feel like throwing in the towel.

What should we do when life gets hard? We find the answer in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a book designed to encourage and motivate Christians to hang in there.

In its original setting, God used a writer unknown to us to urge Jewish Christians to persevere. Some of them were contemplating quitting, and returning to the old ways of Judaism. Hebrews says, "Don't turn back! Remain on course!"

How do you motivate the discouraged and disillusioned? Hebrews does it by putting the spotlight on Christ. In chapters 1-7, we learn that Christ is superior in His person. Then in chapters 8-10, the author shows that Christ is superior in His redemptive work.

And if Christ is superior, it's unthinkable to turn back to the status quo and settle for a deficient system of works like Judaism offered.

We need Hebrews for we, too, get discouraged at times. We, too, young and older Christians alike, may feel like giving up.

So what should we do when life gets hard? God's Word gives us very practical counsel in the first fourteen verses of Hebrews 12, a text to which we'll dedicate our attention in a two-part series I've entitled, *When Life Gets Hard*.

We'll begin today with the first three verses. According to Hebrews 12:1-3, when life gets hard we must devote ourselves to two responsibilities.

Grammatically, in the Greek text and unlike in our English translations, there are only two main verbs in verses 1-3. Furthermore, a host of participles and phrases modify these two main verbs. The first main verb occurs at the end of verse 1 and identifies our first responsibility.

### I. When life gets hard, we must run (1).

Verse 1 states, "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."

The main verb in verse 1 occurs at the end, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." The Christian life is likened to a race, and not a sprint either. Living for Christ is like running a distance race.

"Let us run," the text exhorts us. The Greek verb is *trechomen*, and could be translated, "Let's keep on running." That indicates Christianity is not a spectator sport. We must exert effort, not to enter the Christian life but to live it.

We're running a race, a race which began at our conversion and will end when we die. "So let's run!" the writer urges us.

But how do you run when you don't feel like running? And how do you keep running when you feel like quitting? The rest of the verse tells us what's involved in running this race, namely, two things.

A. The race involves a crowd (1a). Most of the distance races I ever ran didn't have much of a crowd. When the gun sounded to begin the Cross Country race, there were the contestants, some coaches, a few parents, and maybe a squirrel or two.

But in the race of the Christian life, there's a crowd. The text begins, "Therefore, since we are surrounded [KJV, "compassed about"] by such a great cloud of witnesses."

Though we may feel like it at times, we're not alone in the race. Just what is this "great cloud of witnesses?" And if they're "surrounding" us, how come we can't see them? Where is this crowd?

The text calls them "witnesses." The Greek word is *marturon* from which we get the English word "martyr."

This is a different kind of crowd. It's not a crowd that's looking at us. Rather, we're to look at them.

Where are they? Actually, they're in heaven but their names appear in the preceding chapter. Who are these martyrs that inspire us to run the race for Christ? They're the people of faith mentioned in chapter 11: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, David, and others.

What do all these witnesses have in common? First, they are all people of faith. They believed God and obeyed God no matter how hard it got. And secondly, they completed their races. They kept going until they finished. And today they're in heaven.

Beloved, we are surrounded by this "cloud of witnesses." The witnesses aren't spectators. I don't believe the verse teaches that they're witnessing what we're doing. Instead, they are *bearing witness* to us that by God's help we can make it just like they did.

Do you hear them? Abel lived by faith and it cost him his life—but he finished his race. Noah lived by faith, built an ark, and the world mocked him—but he finished his race. Abraham obeyed God even when it didn't make sense—and he finished his race. In fact, Hebrews 11:13 puts it plainly, "All these people were still living by faith when they died."

The point is twofold. First...

1. *Others have finished the race.* They didn't give up. They didn't quit when things got tough. They persevered. They kept taking God at His Word. They kept living by faith. And secondly...

2. *We can do the same.* We, too, can finish the course.

Earlier this year a friend gave me one of those gadgets that test your problem-solving skills. It's a piece of wood with three pegs in it, an attached rope, and a ring. The object is to move the rope in such a way that you release the ring. Sounds simple enough, doesn't it?

My family spent hours trying to figure out the puzzle. Every so often one of us would say, "I don't think it can be done. It's impossible."

In June, the Camp Staff came to our house one evening, and Sherry handed the object to Gary Storm and said, "Here's a puzzle for you. If you can figure it out, I'll give you a million dollars."

Twenty minutes later Gary handed her the ring. And we'll be in debt for a long, long time!

When you're facing a challenge, doesn't it encourage you to know that others have made it? Sure the Christian life is hard, but by God's grace countless others have finished the race, and so can we.

Are you discouraged right now? Listen to the crowd. Do you hear Abel, Noah, and Abraham? Did they ever get discouraged? Sure they did. But they fixed their eyes on God, and by His strength they reached the end of the course. And their examples are on the page in front of us, in black and white, cheering us on, "Keep going! You can make it!"

You may be thinking, "Wait a minute. It takes more than hype to finish a race. Is there something specific we must do if we're going to finish the race?" Yes, there is.

B. The race involves a strategy (1b). The strategy is very specific. There are three decisions we must make if we're serious about finishing this race.

1. *Get rid of all hindrances.* Notice the text again, "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.*"

The last thing we always did before a Cross Country race was remove our sweats, outer shirts, and put on our light-weight spikes. The last thing we wanted to do was carry unnecessary weight around the course.

I remember vividly the State meet. It was always the first Saturday in November, and we ran around 10:00 in the morning. It was cold at the Scarlet and Gray golf course in Columbus. The spectators had on winter coats and tobagans, but not the runners. When race time came we stripped off our warm sweats, and wore the lightest clothing we could. The goal wasn't to be comfortable. The goal was to win the race.

Sometimes we forget that in the Christian life. The goal isn't our comfort. It's faithfulness. And if we're going to live faithfully for our Savior, we need to eliminate some things—two things to be specific.

First we need to get rid of "everything that hinders." In the Greek text that's one Greek word, *onkon*. It's translated "weight" in the KJV. In classical Greek the word *onkon* referred to excess physical weight as well as any burdensome load.

What are these "weights" that need to go? Simply put, a weight is anything that hinders our progress. It could be a habit, an ambition, a possession, or even a person.

You don't run with heavy boots and a trench coat, not if the race is long and you want to win. Anything that handicaps us must go. Someone has well observed, "If we would travel far, we must travel light."

Right here may be why some of us are discouraged about the race. We're carrying around excess baggage. The hindrances may, in fact, be good things, not sinful things.

Work is good, but it can become an idol, too. Having friends is good, but we can become obsessed with wanting people to like us. That, too, is an *onkon*, a weight.

Do you have anything in your life that is hindering your Christian walk? Busyness can be a weight. So can the love of pleasure. What are we supposed to do with hindrances that keep us from running the race well? Throw them off!

But there's something else that needs to go, too, something the text calls "the sin that so easily entangles." The writer doesn't mention any particular sin. It's not *a* sin, but *the* sin. Quite likely, he's referring to the sin of unbelief which is the opposite of the trait for which he commended the witnesses in chapter 11.

Why did Abraham and Noah and Moses keep going even when the race became hard? The bottom line is this. They *believed* God. And why is it that others give up? It boils down to this sin—*unbelief*. They stop taking God at His Word. They stop living by faith and start living by their feelings.

I'll be frank. If you're a person who lives by your feelings, you won't run the race well. When you have a bad day, you won't read your Bible and pray. And when you don't feel like coming to church, you won't. Know this. It's impossible to run well while you're carrying around the baggage of doubt and self-pity or any other form of unbelief.

But if you're serious about running the race, make decision #1 today. Get rid of all hindrances. Throw them off.

2. *Get ready for hardship.* Notice the phrase that follows the command to run, "Let us run *with perseverance* ["patience" in the KJV]." What does the word "perseverance" imply about running the race? It won't be easy! There will be times when we feel like stopping. When that happens, what must we do? Persevere!

The author offered a similar charge back in 10:35-36, "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to *persevere* so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."

Again, I think back to Cross Country. A vital part of the race occurred before the gun ever sounded. We would inspect the course and find out where the tough spots would be. Then we'd prepare ourselves mentally for the race.

In running, preparation is half the battle. It's no different in the Christian life.

One of the first things I tell new believers is that hard times will come. Not *may* come, but *will* come. Why do I tell them that? Because I don't want them to be surprised when life gets hard and the feeling of their first love wanes. I want them to know God's strategy. Step #1, get rid of all hindrances. Step #2, get ready for hardship.

3. *Stay on the course.* Verse 1 concludes, "Let us run with perseverance *the race marked out for us.*" The KJV refers to it as the race "that is set before us." Please note that our course is predetermined—by God, of course. What's more, the race of each believer is distinctive. No two believers face the same trials in life. Yes, there are similarities, but our wise, Heavenly Father tailor-makes the course He wants us to run.

We don't invent the course—that's not our job. It's God's. Our task is to stay on the course, the one God marks out for us. But sometimes that's not so easy to do.

When a person cries out, "Why me?" what they are really saying is, "Why do I have to run this course, God? I'd rather run the course You've given Bill or Mary!"

Think about it. Abel, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph all faced trials. But the specific trials they encountered were different. They each ran a different course, the course mapped out for them by a wise, Sovereign God.

Beloved, think of this. God has a special plan for each of His children, a plan that includes trials as well as grace sufficient for the trials. What's our responsibility? It's to stay on course. It's to say, "Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way; You are the Potter, I am the clay."

So there's the first responsibility. When life gets hard, we must run. But what are we supposed to do while we're running? What should be our focus in the race? The answer brings us to our second responsibility.

## II. When life gets hard, we must remember (2-3).

Remember what? Verse 2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." The word "fix" is actually a participle in the Greek text, and is translated "looking unto Jesus" in the KJV. It modifies the command, "Let us run," in verse 1.

What are we supposed to do while we're running the race? We're to fix our eyes on Jesus.

What a runner does with his eyes is key. If he looks around, he might stumble. If he looks back, he could break stride or even fall. To run efficiently, he must run with a proper focus.

Listen. It's so easy for a Christian to lose his focus, especially when the race gets hard. What should we do to maintain or regain a proper focus? The answer is, *remember*. Remember what? Three things according to verses 2-3...

A. Remember who Jesus is (2a). "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." What's true of our Savior? We're given two descriptive titles right here.

First, He's the "author" of our faith. And second, He's the "perfecter" [or "finisher", KJV] of our faith. Actually, the word "our" isn't in the text. The literal rendering says Jesus is the "author and perfecter of *the* faith."

What's that indicate about Jesus? Two things...

1. *He's the One who started the race.* What's more...

2. *He's the One who will finish it.* In other words, Jesus is the pioneer of faith. He's also its perfection.

Beloved, when life gets hard, remember who Jesus is. Earlier in Hebrews 3:1, the author gave a similar exhortation, "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, *fix your thoughts on Jesus*, the apostle and high priest whom we confess."

B. Remember what Jesus did (2b). "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."

Did you realize that Jesus already did what we're called to do? He entered this world as the God-man, and ran the course His Father placed before Him. It was a course that took Him to the Cross.

When life gets hard, we need to remember what our Savior did, namely four activities mentioned here.

1. *He focused on future joy.* "Who for the joy set before him," the text reads. What motivated Jesus to go to the Cross? Why did He do it? He set His focus on "the joy set before him."

What was "the joy" set before Jesus? Was it the anticipation of returning to heaven? In part. Was it the expectation of securing a redeemed people? In part, for we are His inheritance (Eph 1:18). Was it because

He knew He'd come out of the tomb alive? Again, in part, yes. But I think it was something else, something bigger.

Please realize this. When our Lord came to earth, He laid aside the use of His divine power for His own personal needs. When Satan tempted Him to do so (Matt 4:1-4), He refused. What kept Him going as He faced hardship? It was the joy set before Him, yes, but what was that joy?

I think we find the answer in Jesus' prayer to His Father in John 17:1-4, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him."

Stop there for a moment. What did Jesus say His Father did? In eternity past, the Father gave the Son a gift. What was the gift? It was a chosen people. And what did the Son do? He came into the world to give eternal life to the chosen people His Father had given to Him.

Jesus continues talking to His Father in verse 3, "Now this is eternal life: that they [who? The love gift, the people the Father gave to the Son] may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

That was the task the Father gave the Son. That was the Savior's course, to give His life to redeem the love-gift that His Father gave Him.

Ponder that. Because the Father loved His Son, He gave His Son a gift, an elect people who would exist for His praise throughout eternity. And to prove His love for His Father, the Son entered the world to redeem this chosen people. That was His course.

Did the Son finish His course? The Son answers the question in verse 4, "I have brought you glory on earth on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."

What was the joy set before Jesus? It was fulfilling His Father's plan. It was the anticipation of returning to heaven, looking into the eyes of the Father He loves, and saying, "Mission accomplished."

What brought Jesus joy was pleasing His Father. Is that true of you? And because it was the Savior's joy to please His Father, here's what He did—activity #2...

*2. He endured the cross.* That's an interesting word. What happened on the Cross? Yes, Jesus died there, but that's not all. Here we're told He "endured" the Cross.

We don't like to endure. We want immediate gratification. Indeed, we try to get out of unpleasant circumstances.

Not our Savior. He endured the Cross.

Please realize that to die by crucifixion was the most humiliating form of execution one could experience in the first century. It was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen. The Romans reserved this punishment for the worst of the worst, for those they deemed unfit to live. Crucifixion was degrading and disgraceful.

But Jesus endured the Cross. Thirdly...

*3. He despised shame.* "Scorning its shame," the text reads. Jesus scorned the shame of the Cross.

Ponder the depth of this mystery, fellow Christian. Philip Hughes can help us. He writes, "The shame of the cross, where Christ bore the sins of the world, is something infinitely more intense than the pain of the cross."

Others have suffered the pain of crucifixion, but he alone has endured the shame of human depravity in all its foulness and degradation."

Jesus despised the shame of the Cross. Please realize that the shame of the Cross would have been more offensive to Jesus than to us. Why? Because He was perfect! Yet on the Cross He was treated as though He Himself had committed the sins of every person that would ever believe on Him, when in fact He had never committed even one sin. No wonder He despised the shame of the Cross! Finally...

4. *He received His reward.* "And sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." What a transfer! From the lowest, most demeaning place imaginable—the Cross—to the highest, most important place in the universe—the throne of God!

What a moment it was! Jesus returned to His Father, to the place He'd enjoyed before entering the world. And what did He do when He arrived? He *sat down*. He'd finished His course.

Oh, beloved, remember. When life gets hard, remember who Jesus is. And remember what Jesus did. But go further...

C. Remember how much Jesus suffered (3). We come to the second main verb of the section. The first was "run" in verse 1. Here's the second, "*Consider* him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Consider. It's an accounting term meaning "to take an account of." The idea is "contemplate." The Greek word is *analogisasthe*. Our English word "analogy" is a transliteration of it. The text is urging us to make a mental analogy and compare our sufferings with what our Savior suffered. Do that, and you'll discover two things...

1. *We'll never suffer as much as He did.* "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men." What did Jesus endure? Opposition--*antilogian*, the word means "speech against." Oh, the ridicule our Savior experienced.

Brothers and sisters, we'll never suffer as much as He did. Never. Furthermore...

2. *We'll never give up as long as we remember Him.* Our text concludes, "Consider Him...so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

As long as we remember Christ, there are two things that *won't* happen. We won't grow weary. And we won't lose heart.

Are you weary? Are you losing heart in the hardness of life? Then resolve to do two things this morning. Run. And remember.

Implications: We learn some lessons about suffering...

I'll simply mention three as we conclude...

1. *Suffering has a limit.* It will end. It will not last forever, not for the child of God.

2. *Suffering has a purpose.* The events of life are not haphazard. Our Father in heaven has mapped out a course for us. So trust Him.

I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Hebrews 12:1-3 taken from *The Message*: "Do you see what this



means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's *there*, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"

Suffering has a limit. Suffering has a purpose. And finally, know this...

*3. Suffering is a way to please our Father and identify with our Savior.*