

Main Idea: In Hebrews 12:1-3, we learn that when life gets hard, pilgrims embrace two responsibilities.

- I. When life gets hard, pilgrims keep running (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, pilgrims keep remembering (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.

Make It Personal: Godly pilgrims affirm three things 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.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Life is hard. In fact, in some ways life gets harder once Christ sets you free because now you’re in a battle with three enemies that once held you captive on their side—the world, the flesh, and the devil. And the temptation to go back to the old ways is ever present.

E.g.—

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

So what is a pilgrim to do when life gets hard? That’s the question we’ve been pondering in our current series “Pilgrims in Progress.”

We’ve been finding the answer in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a book designed to encourage and motivate the pilgrim follower of Jesus to stay in the race.

In the first century, the Spirit of God used a writer unknown to us to urge Jewish Christians to persevere. Some of them were contemplating quitting and returning to their old ways. Hebrews says, “Don’t turn back! Remain on course!”

So how do you motivate people like that, the discouraged and disillusioned? The man who wrote Hebrews does it by putting the spotlight on Christ. In chapters 1-7, we learn that the person of Christ is superior. There’s none like Him, none that compares.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Hebrews series preached at WBC in 2009.

Then in chapters 8-10, the author shows that the redemptive work of Christ is superior to all else. Christ did what no one else could ever do. He made a payment that cancels the debt of sin for those who believe in Him.

So if Christ is superior in His person and work, it's unthinkable to try Him out, so to speak, and then decide that the old ways were better. How could anything be better than Christ?

We need the message of Hebrews today, for pilgrims today get discouraged too. We, young and older Christians alike, may feel like giving up. Oh, we may not stop calling ourselves a "Christian," but we'll stop living like one, for a Christian is a Christ-follower, and we stop following Christ with the devotion that the One who died for us deserves.

So what should we do when life gets hard? God's Word gives us very practical counsel in Hebrews 12:1-3. When life gets hard pilgrims embrace two responsibilities.

Grammatically, in the Greek text and unlike in our English translations, there are only two main verbs in verses 1-3, with a host of participles and phrases that 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, pilgrims keep running (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, no, but certainly 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, or worse, 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 in high school 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. And that was it.

But in this particular race, 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 this race. We're actually surrounded by witnesses.

Just who is this "great cloud of witnesses?" And if they're "surrounding" us, how come we can't see them?

The text calls *marturon*, that's the Greek word for witnesses, from which we get the English word "martyr." So 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 pilgrims whose faith is commended 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 who exhibited faith, who put their total trust in God and obeyed Him no matter how hard it got. And secondly, by depending on His gracious help, they completed their races. They kept going until they reached the finish line. 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 intent of this verse is to teach 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 when his brother killed him—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 this.

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...

2. *We can do the same.* We, too, can finish the course that is set before us.

Several years ago 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."

Then in June of that year, the Scioto Hills 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're going to be in Gary's 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 of witnesses. Listen to Abel, Noah, Abraham, and the rest. 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 this race. Just because somebody else did it doesn't necessarily mean I can. I need help, practical help to keep running."

And we have it right here.

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 toboggans, 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 achieve our mission and bring home a State championship.

Sometimes we forget that in the Christian life. The goal isn't our comfort. It's to achieve our mission. And if we're going to achieve the mission our Savior gave us, we need to eliminate some things—two things to be precise.

First we need to get rid of "everything that hinders." In the Greek text that's one Greek word, *ogkon*. It's translated "weight" in the KJV. In classical Greek the word *ogkon* 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, a distracting 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."²

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

For instance, 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 *ogkon*, 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. In other words, make changes to they're not hindering our race toward the prize.

What "weight" was the writer referring to? Remember he's talking to Jewish Christians. John MacArthur offers a helpful explanation:

It was the baggage of their former Judaistic legalism. They were running, I guess you could say, like overweight people in bulky sweatshirts. They were going to collapse in a pile of legalistic sweat. You can't run the race dragging along everything from the past.

The biggest weight encumbering these new believers, pounds and pounds and pounds of Jewish legalism, rabbinic tradition, dead works, dead weight. And it wasn't easy to let it go. It was ingrained in them, Sabbath observances, for example...

² Barclay, 172.

They were holding on to the temple. They were holding on to the priests. They were holding on to the rituals. They were holding on to the ceremonies. That's why all through this letter the writer says there is a better priesthood, right? And a better sacrifice and even a better temple and a better covenant. And in chapter 6 he says, "Let's go on, leave these things behind." Even at the end of chapter 5, it says the same thing. We can never run by faith if you're hanging on to works, or any of the trappings of a works system.

The race is run by faith, plus nothing. And anything you hang on to from past religion that is made up of pointless ceremonies and traditions and rituals and rules, will only slow you down.³

If your past includes a religious background of ceremonies and icons and rules about what you eat and don't eat, you have the same choice to make. Will you affirm what God's Word says, that faith in Christ alone makes a person right with God, or will you keep trying to carry the dead weight of your own religious deeds as you run the race?

But there's something else that needs to go, 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, *the sin* is the opposite of the trait for which he commended the witnesses in chapter 11, which was faith. *The sin* is the sin of unbelief.

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 trusting in the person of God and living in light of the promises of God, regardless how they feel. They stop living by faith.

So 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.

So if we want to run the race and finish well, let's make decision #1 today, to 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? That 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 days. A vital part of running a good race occurred before the gun ever sounded. We would inspect the course and find out where the tough spots might 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 John MacArthur, message on Hebrews 12:1-3, [http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-390/the-race-of-faith?Term=the sin that so easily entangles](http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-390/the-race-of-faith?Term=the%20sin%20that%20so%20easily%20entangles)

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.

My friends, 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 our first responsibility. When life gets hard, we must keep running.

But what are we supposed to do while we’re running? What should be our focus in this pilgrim race? The answer brings us to our second responsibility.

II. When life gets hard, pilgrims keep remembering (2-3).

Remembering 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 critical. 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.

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.* He’s the *founder*. 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.⁴

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.”

⁴ Bruce, p. 352.

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 helpless 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 will 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.”

So 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, “Father, mission accomplished!”

What brought Jesus joy was pleasing His Father. Is that true of us? If it is, it’ll keep us going when the course gets bumpy. Because it was the Savior’s joy to please His Father, it kept Him going when His course took Him to an unthinkable hurdle...

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 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. What's more...

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."⁵

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 absolutely sinless. Yet on the cross He was treated as though He Himself had committed the sins of the people in whose place He was dying, 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*, for 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. Keep running. And keep remembering.

Make It Personal: Godly pilgrims affirm three things about suffering...

⁵ Philip Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 525.

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. I should clarify that if you do not know Christ, you will suffer forever. If you leave this world without putting your total trust in Christ Jesus, you will not head to a "better place" (as people often wrongly assess), but to a place of torment the Bible calls hell. Oh, dear unbelieving friend, call on Christ today and be saved! Join the ranks of undeserving pilgrims who by God's grace know that suffering has a limit.

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.* And in the light of eternity, there's nothing that matters more.