

Hebrews 12:1-13

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us. ²Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne. ³Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.

⁴You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood in your fight against sin. ⁵Have you also forgotten the encouragement that addresses you as sons?

My son, do not regard the Lord's discipline lightly,
and do not become weary of his correction.

⁶For the Lord disciplines the one whom he loves,
and he corrects every son he accepts.

⁷Endure suffering as discipline. God is dealing with you as sons. Is there a son whose father does not discipline him? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and all of us have received it), then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹In addition, we have earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them. Should we not submit even more to the Father of the spirits and live? ¹⁰They disciplined us for a little while, according to what seemed best to them, but God disciplines us for our good, so that we may have a share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant when it is happening, but painful, yet later it yields a peaceful harvest of righteousness for those who have been trained by it.

¹²Therefore strengthen your weak hands and feeble knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated but rather healed.

Run with Patient Endurance

I.

The stadium was empty. The little groups gathered on the sidelines seemed smaller than usual because of the row upon row of vacant seats that stretched out above them. This was a new thing. Sometimes stadiums put cardboard cutouts of fans or celebrities in the seats, but it wasn't the same.

The lack of people in the seats was disconcerting. The athletes were used to yells and screams and cheers. Sometimes in these empty stadiums they even longed for the taunting jeers of the fans from the opposing team. The only sounds that broke the silence came from the competitors themselves. It was eerie, in a way.

It was the year of covid competition. The athletes weren't training any less, but without the fans cheering—or even booing—it just seemed harder to get into the proper mood for the competition.

One of the things that was heard from competitors over and over again after it was all behind us was that they were glad to have the fans back in the stands. Hearing the sounds of the crowd makes it all more enjoyable.

Last week we talked about putting things in the proper perspective. Heaven is coming. By faith Abraham and the other people the writer to the Hebrews spoke about watched and waited for the Savior and longed for his coming. None of them got to see him with their own eyes, but they trusted God's promise. We haven't seen Jesus with our own eyes, either, but we trust God's Word which reported to us all the things that he did to make our salvation

sure and certain. We look back in faith at the same promises all the heroes of the Old Testament looked ahead at.

By faith we know God's promises. By faith we put things in perspective. "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal" (Hebrews 12:2, EHV).

You heard that last week. You hear it regularly in church. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Look forward to heaven. Keep things in perspective. You are strangers in this world; heaven is your real home.

Some of these even sound like themes from my own sermons over the years.

II.

That's all well and good, but...

Day in and day out, the realities of this world interfere. The struggles are endless. There are sicknesses. There are financial problems. There are challenges within your family—squabbles and fights and disagreements and heartache. The death of loved ones touches us all sooner or later, too.

Before he said "fix your eyes on Jesus," the writer said: "...Let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us" (Hebrews 12:1, EHV).

Athletes might wear warm-up clothing as they wait on the sidelines, but off it comes before they take to the field or the court or the starting line. Extra layers would hinder their ability to perform and cannot be tolerated.

Sometimes those struggles of life we all face become a burden. That burden becomes sin that easily ensnares. Just a little worry in the heart and failing to take things to the Lord in prayer becomes sin that so easily ensnares us. Doubt encroaches on faith—doubt of God and his promises. Is he *really* on your side at all? Not only does it feel like God is *not* on your side, sometimes you begin to feel as though the challenges you face are a punishment from God. It doesn't seem logical that God would let someone he loves have to face sorrow and heartache every day. Why would God allow you to have to come face to face with potential financial ruin? What did you do wrong that God would lay cancer or heart disease or any one of a thousand other medical challenges on your plate?

"Have you also forgotten the encouragement that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard the Lord's discipline lightly, and do not become weary of his correction. ⁶For the Lord disciplines the one whom he loves, and he corrects every son he accepts" (Hebrews 12:5-6, EHV).

Parents—*good* parents—have to discipline their children from time to time. Children almost never like it at the time.

"Endure suffering as discipline. God is dealing with you as sons. Is there a son whose father does not discipline him? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and all of us have received it), then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Hebrews 12:7-8, EHV). There's that same "perspective" thing we talked about last week. Even the challenges of life—even the *problems* you have to face in life—are to be seen as discipline.

Discipline is different than punishment. Punishment is to exact a payment. Discipline is to train.

III.

I know a woman who participates in body building competitions. She has a trainer to get prepared. To be sure, there are exercises that will maximize the look needed for the

competition, but there is also a special diet. It's mostly chicken and broccoli and cauliflower. The main condiment she's allowed is mustard—just plain, yellow mustard. Fast food is out. Even things that are considered healthy foods might affect her physique the wrong way for the competition, so for weeks at a time it's only a few special foods.

I'm sure that some times she doesn't like her coach much. The exercise routine undoubtedly gets old. The diet is boring when it only consists of a few foods. But there is a goal.

“Let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us. ²Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne” (Hebrews 12:1-2, EHV). Athletes endure the suffering and the training because they are focused on the goal. Last week we were reminded that Old Testament believers lived “by faith,” and that we do, too. The author of that faith is Jesus. He is the One who brings our faith to its goal.

Jesus had to go through the discipline of training. He kept *his* eyes fixed on the goal throughout his earthly life, too. Do you think the fans in the stands energized him? He had *your* eternal future firmly in his mind. The joy *you* will experience when you get to heaven was at the front of his mind, even while he hung there on the cross, enduring its torture and disregarding its shame. He hung there for you.

“Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:3, EHV). Jesus is your inspiration. Remember all that he did, so that you may not lose heart as you continue your own training. He already won for you.

IV.

“Therefore strengthen your weak hands and feeble knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated but rather healed.” (Hebrews 12:12-13, EHV). Keep training.

Athletes training for competition aren't the only thing that comes to mind when you read these verses. Anyone who has had to deal with physical therapy after an injury or surgery can relate. Day after day you see the physical therapist. You know it isn't going to be pleasant, but that's part of the path to recovery. You have to regain strength in your weak hands and feeble knees, or whatever other parts of your body need rehab. If you don't keep going, perhaps it will never heal properly. So you keep going.

Your journey through life is a race in which your Lord Jesus, the author of your faith and the One who brings it to its goal, sustains you with his Word and Sacrament. By faith you have a new relationship with God. You are a forgiven child of God. You are an heir of eternal life.

The training will continue. The coach, our loving heavenly Father, will continue to discipline us so we grow in faith. Any suffering we endure along the way is just part of the training—the discipline of a Father who loves us more than we could ever ask or imagine.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us” (Hebrews 12:1, EHV).

That word “therefore” at the beginning of today's reading points us back to chapter 11 and all the people the writer spoke of who lived by faith. They are a great cloud of witnesses. The stands are full. Keep running. Keep training. When you get to the finish line of life, they will be there to greet you in heaven. Amen.