

**Hebrews 12:1-13** Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. <sup>4</sup> You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. <sup>5</sup> And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; <sup>6</sup> For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." <sup>7</sup> If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? <sup>8</sup> But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. <sup>11</sup> Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. <sup>12</sup> Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

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With the Olympics back in Greece, much has been reported about those first Olympics games back in Greece. Perhaps you have heard about them. They were held in Olympia, a town some miles from Athens where most people lived. Yet, the people would brave the awful conditions to go see the ancient athletes compete. Throughout the history of these events various events were devised and held. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, the games included an event called the pentathlon, a competition comprised of five different events. Out of all of those five events, only one lasted very long at all. Only one required any endurance. It was the footrace. Oh, it was nothing in length compared to the marathon of modern Olympics, but yet in the awful conditions, endurance was necessary to finish the race.

The author of Hebrews lived in the time when these ancient games at Olympia were still occurring. Perhaps he even attended one. Regardless of his attendance at the games, when he decided to use an illustration to encourage the Hebrews in their Christian walk, he chose to use the illustration of the foot race. He masterfully used the illustration to its full power. He asked the Hebrews to envision the stands filled with those faithful men and women of the past who had in times past ran the same race. Then he encouraged them to prepare to run the foot race set before them. No doubt, he chose this analogy of the footrace to help them

realize that the race set before them would not be over in an instant, but rather would require endurance to finish.

To put it in the context of our modern Olympics, the Christian life is not a 100 meter sprint, but a marathon. Indeed, it is not over in an instant, but requires endurance to finish.

By the time this letter was written, the Olympics had begun a practice that seems very odd to our modern ears. As you might have heard in the news, the athletes in these ancient games competed in the nude. This certainly was not done to be risqué. It was done simply so that nothing, not even clothes could impede their performance. Nothing was left to drag them down in the race.

So also, the author of Hebrews told the Hebrews to strip off every sin that so easily could hinder them in the race. He too understood that especially in an endurance race, nothing that could be left on that might hinder their performance. The Hebrews were to go to their Lord in repentance in order that He might strip them of their sin by offering them the forgiveness only the Perfect Runner made Sacrifice could offer.

Next, they were to fix their eyes on Jesus. You see, Jesus had shown to them how one perfectly runs the race with flawless obedience and great endurance. For the joy that was set before Him, He perfectly endured all, even the cross and its shame. He was the One who had proven that the end result of obedience and endurance was glory in God's sight. For at the end of His race, He sat down at the right hand of God, his Father.

Lastly, the author of the Hebrews encouraged them to realize that struggles along the race were indeed the very means that God was using to discipline them, His children, in order that they might perform better along the race. God was disciplining them in a way no earthly father could do. After all God was their true Father and desired to see them run the race in a way that would bring Him great joy. So God was through the suffering the Hebrews were enduring dealing with them as sons and daughters, disciplining them in love, making them fit for the race.

Just like the first readers of this text, we too this day are encouraged to consider the race set before us. It is a race that most of us have been running for some time. But still, for most of us, it is far from over. We too must recognize that this race set before us is not a 100 meter sprint, but rather a marathon. It is a race for us also

that will take careful discipline and great endurance to finish. Just like the first readers, we too must strip off any sin that can get in the way of our performance. We are called also this day to leave behind here at church any sin that could entangle us in the race, any sin that could cause us to trip over our own feet. We must truly confess our sins and receive our Lord forgiveness for them. Having received that forgiveness, we then are to fix our eyes on Jesus, the One who ran the race with great perfection. We are called to meditate this day on the fact that His life shows us that the sometimes difficult Christian marathon ends with glory in the presence of God Almighty. And finally, we are called to recognize that the struggles endured during this race are the very means by which God makes us more fit to run. In fact, when we endure struggles for the sake of the cross, it is the very sign that we are sons and daughters of God.

Indeed in some ways our Christian race in this country is easier than it was for the Hebrews, many of whom were openly persecuted for their faith. Paul mentions that so far none of them had strived against sinful people in the world to the extent that they had to shed their blood for the faith. In our country, it would be more true to say that none of us have endured much more than an occasional mocking for the sake of the cross.

But that does not change the fact that the race for us is still long, the struggle against temptation to sin is real, and the struggle with our world may indeed get worse along the course. Perhaps one day in our own country being faithful too will mean shedding our blood for the cross.

Marathon runners in the modern day Olympics pass by many water breaks in the course. These breaks are chance for the athlete to refresh himself along the way, to regain strength for the miles that lie ahead. So also in the race of faith, we Christians are given many chances for refreshment and renewal along the way.

Each time we jog up to the confession of sins in the liturgy, we are encouraged to truly make use of it. We are called to throw off our sins with sincerity and to receive the life-giving water of forgiveness. If we just mutter the words without any real meaning, we miss out on the renewing break that this act is intended by God to be. For without true confession, the words of absolution provide no refreshment. But when we wholeheartedly ponder our sins and confess them, we receive in absolution full drink of forgiveness from Jesus that provides strength for the race ahead.

Each time we run up to the altar, we once again are called to take the time to be refreshed. For, this wine and bread break grants to us body and blood refreshment along the course of faith

Indeed, wherever it is, each time we speed up to the word of God we are encouraged to take advantage of its refreshing message of life. For, without God's sustaining promises and forgiveness, we will not finish the race. We will pull up short exhausted.

If we neglect the Word, true confession and absolution, and the Lord's Supper, we indeed show that we have forgotten the length of the race. We are acting as if we can make it through without God's help along the way. We are acting as if the Christian life is a 100 meter sprint, when it truly is a marathon.

Today, as we stop along the course of the race of faith, we use the time here in His house as a life-giving water break. We truly confess our sins and receive Christ's forgiveness. We take in each of the words of promise we hear from God's Word scattered throughout the liturgy and in the lessons in and allow them to dwell in us in order that they might renew and rejuvenate us for the race to come.

For, the race ahead is long. It is a marathon race. But with God's help, we will finish it. On that last day we will cross the finish line by God grace and be taken in to His glory.

It was God who has given us the chance to run this race on the day of our baptism where He first extended to us the forgiveness of sins He won at the cross. It is God that today places Hunter into the race. And it is God that promises to forgive and refresh us and Hunter along the way with His forgiveness in his word, by His absolution, and at His altar. It is God who makes us to fit not only to run the race, but also to finish the race. To him be the glory. Amen.