

## Fix Your Eyes on the Finish Line

### Hebrews 12:1-13 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. <sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, <sup>6</sup> because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” <sup>7</sup> Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? <sup>8</sup> If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. <sup>9</sup> 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 spirits and live! <sup>10</sup> They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. <sup>13</sup> “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Today is the closing ceremonies for the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Did you get to see Michael Phelps win even more gold medals? Did you see Usain Bolt retain his title of the fastest man alive as he won gold 3 more times? It’s mind boggling to see how fast these Olympians operate. Then I start to wonder: How many miles did Usain Bolt have run in his life to win gold for three straight summer Olympics? How many laps did Michael Phelps have to swim to win his 23 gold medals? Most times, what we see at the Olympics is a culmination of a life of training for that one moment, that one more push to get to the finish line. How many days of strained muscles, of injuries, of strict diets, of vigorous workout schedules did the gold medalists have to endure and persevere through?

Although we may not be Olympic athletes, God draws a comparison between athletes running a race and our lives. The author of the letter to the Hebrews under inspiration from God tells us “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (verse 1) This life that we live, we live for God. We live it by running a race, one with a beginning and an end. The beginning is when you were brought to faith in Christ Jesus as your Savior, whether that be when you first heard what God had done for you to save you from the deadness of your sin or when you were given rebirth, a new life, through the waters of Holy Baptism. The finish line is death, the day you are done running and you will live forever in victory or in defeat.

To run this race marked out for us, it’s not easy. Think of the Olympic athletes as they trained for their moment of victory. How many times did their coaches have to correct their form and have them do it all over again? How many laps had Michael Phelps already swam when his coach said, “Do it again”? How many miles had Usain Bolt already run when the trainer said, “One more lap”? After hours of training, when the athletes were out of breath, muscles shaking, and they could barely hold themselves up, how many times were they told, “Do it faster. Do it better”? The coaches and trainers were disciplining their athletes so that they could win, but the athletes recall the workout routines as torture with sore muscles, aching joints, and the like. They had to go through pain as they were being disciplined to perfect their race.

God disciplines his followers, and sometimes it’s hard to see what he is disciplining us for. For the original audience of this letter to the Hebrews, the author says, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” (verse 4) No, they had not yet shed blood, but they had watched their friends and family be publicly humiliated. They themselves had been subjected to ridicule and insults. Their property had been unlawfully seized. Many of them had been put in jail for running this race marked out for them by God, this race of living the Christian life. All these hardships and all these pains were causing them to lose heart and grow weary of running this race for God. They were ready to quit.

What makes us want to quit this race for God? Is it the opponents who disassociate with you because you are a Christian, because you make it known that you believe differently than they do? Is it the discipline, that you keep hearing from God and his Word, “You’re doing it wrong. You need to do it like this. You need to endure the ridicule, the wrongs. You need to hold your tongue while you are insulted and not lash out with angry or careless words. You need to resist that desire to skip church when you don’t feel like

going. You need to do better. Do it again. Do it right.”? But I’m weak. God, this is hard. I know I’m supposed to endure. I know that I’m supposed to persevere, but how can I finish running this race? I don’t have the strength! I’m worn out. I’m done!

God strengthens us for this race with the critical piece of training: Fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (verse 2) Keep your eyes on the finish line. Any racer knows that this is the best strategy. You start looking around at other competitors, staring down the person jeering you, looking only at your feet, you will lose focus on the goal, the finish line. So, when it comes to running this race marked out for us, this race of living the Christian life, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, on the first place finisher.

Jesus already ran the spiritual race, and he did so against great opposition and while also enduring great pain and hardship. He endured constant challenges from his enemies throughout his entire life on earth, but his greatest hardship came as he neared the finish line. It’s sometimes called the “Via Dolorosa” which is a Latin phrase meaning “the way of pain.” It’s the name given to the path in Jerusalem that Jesus took from the governor’s house to Golgotha, the place of the Skull, the place where Jesus was nailed to the cross. On his way, men heaped insults on him. They struck him in the face saying, “Prophecy! Tell us who hit you!” They smashed a crown of thorns onto his head as they beat him with a staff. They scourged him, used a whip with pieces of metal and bone attached to it specifically to dig into his skin and rip huge gashes as they pulled it out – 39 times they did this. They spit on him – not polite little ptoowey type spitting, but more akin to phlegm wads with mucus. The crowds mocked and jeered him along the way. The criminals who were crucified with him had enough strength to insult him. “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” “He saved others, but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” (Matthew 27:40, 42-43) The throbbing pain in his head. The cramped muscles in his legs. The burning in his lungs from lack of oxygen. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Lips chapped, dried, cracked, and bleeding from dehydration. He endured one more insult, one more hardship, one more lap in his race to be perfect for all humankind. In his struggle against sin, he resisted well past the point of shedding his blood. Jesus endured.

On that cross, Jesus looked nothing like a winner, nothing like a gold medal athlete. But our perception of Jesus as he was enduring all of this and what he was actually accomplishing are two different things. “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame.” (verse 2) The world saw Jesus as a loser as he hung on the cross. Still to this day people revile the cross. It’s pain. It’s bloody. It’s cruel. It’s a means of execution. But Jesus saw the finish line. So, he scorned the shame of the cross. He rejected it knowing that it was part of the race marked out for him. This was his finish line, his death. Jesus saw what would come after the cross. He saw the vindication, the justification, of the entire human race. He saw his victory over death just beyond the cross. He saw that victory going to each and every one of us. Jesus fixed his eyes on his finish line and made it across in first place. He sat down at the right hand of God, having all authority on heaven and on earth given to him. He stood victorious after enduring the cross, gold medal in hand, first place. He finished the race marked out for him, a race to conquer death, sin, and the devil for all humankind.

The best part is, he not only ran the race for us, but he also finished it for us. He is the pioneer and perfecter of faith by giving us his gold medal result, his perfect finish to the life he lived on earth. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we are focusing on his finish as now our finish. His victory as our victory. You already have the gold medal in hand. So, now, finish your race. “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Yes, there will be hardships living this life as a Christian, running the race of life that God has marked out for us. But every time that you grow weary, every time you think about stopping, every time the hardships of life weigh you down, fix your eyes on Jesus. Fix your eyes on the fact that he has already ran the race for you. When the hardships come, endure them as discipline from God. He corrects you not to make you discouraged, but to get you to the finish line. His Word, his direction to have us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, strengthens us to finish this race. His corrections, our hardships in being disciplined by him, these are marks of God caring for us, treating us as his children. We don’t have to like it, but we know that God is doing it for our good. “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.” (verse 11) This is why God pushes us for one more stride, why he corrects our form. He pushes us to the finish line, disciplining us, focusing our eyes on Jesus, the perfecter of our faith.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God knows that it’s hard for you to run with perseverance the race marked out for us by him. We do grow weary. Sometimes we do lose heart. But God disciplines us and strengthens us to finish strong. He trains us to fix our eyes on Jesus to see that we are already gold medalists. We know we have the victory because Christ has won it for us. So, “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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” (verses 1-2) Amen.