

# Running the Race

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**Bible Text:** Hebrews 12:1-2  
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## Grace Protestant Reformed Church

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Let's turn in the inspired scriptures to Hebrews chapter 12. Our text this evening is the first two verses of that chapter and let's read the chapter in its entirety, Hebrews chapter 12. This is the word of God.

1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 2 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. 4 Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. 5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. 7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? 8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. 9 Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. 11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. 12 Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; 13 And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. 14 Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: 15 Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; 16 Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. 17 For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was

rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. 18 For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, 19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: 20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) 22 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, 23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. 25 See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: 26 Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. 27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: 29 For our God is a consuming fire.

So far we read God's word.

Let's go back to verses 1 and 2 of the chapter. That's our text.

1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 2 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ, our text tonight is the grand conclusion of Hebrews chapter 11. You children, probably many of you have memorized Hebrews 11 or most of the chapter, and you're very, very familiar with what's found in it. You have all of these Old Testament saints like Abel and Enoch and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and so on, and what you find as a common denominator as you go through the chapter, is that these Old Testament saints lived by faith. By faith. By faith. By faith. They clung to the promises of God although they did not see those promises fulfilled in their lives yet on earth. And now Hebrews 12 verses 1 and 2, our text, is a conclusion to that 11th chapter of Hebrews. Our life here is compared to a race, a metaphor is what we have, life compared to a race that is run, and we'll come to this later, it is as if those Hebrews 11

Old Testament saints are sitting in a stadium, all in their seats, circling us and we're on the track inside that stadium, we're running on that track, full speed ahead, a sprint, and as we run, we look at these saints who are a witness, a testimony, an example to us as we see them on the pages of scripture here and we're cheered by their example, by their testimony as we run our own race.

We need encouragement as we run the way of this life. We do. So did these people 2,000 years ago to whom the book of Hebrews was addressed. They needed encouragement too. The historical context is that they were being persecuted and in the heat of their persecution, they were tempted to revert back to Judaism and back to the whole bondage of works righteousness. And so he comes to them with the exhortation, "Run, Christians, run the race." And he gives them plenty of encouragement in that. And when you think about it, it's really no different for you and for me. Today, all of us can say the Christian life is difficult. There are many trials, sometimes even agonizing, and so the word of God comes to us and encourages us, as it often does, and we hear the exhortation too for us, let us run, beloved, the race that is set before us. We'll hear this under the theme "Running the Race." In the first place, the race. Second, the encouragement. And then third, the possibility.

Verse 1 refers to a race that we run. It says, "and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." As I said, a metaphor is being used here, of course, and our Christian life is compared to a race. This would not have been an unfamiliar concept to these people to whom the book of Hebrews was written, because you remember that in those ancient days, you had the Greek Olympics. They would have known, of course, what was done in those Olympics and you might have a miles and miles long marathon that you run, or maybe a shorter track race, but they were familiar with it, and you and I are just as familiar with what a race is and what it means to sprint forward.

As with any earthly race, so also the spiritual race has two main elements to it. Two main elements. First of all, as in any earthly race, also the spiritual race, there is a track. A road, a way, a track that is run upon. The track of the spiritual race is the Christian life. It has a starting line, and the starting line is regeneration. When the Spirit of Jesus Christ causes you to be born again, makes you alive, gives you spiritual life from death, regeneration is the starting line, and the finish line is glory when the Lord Jesus Christ takes us and our soul up into heaven to be with him forever there. A couple things about this track. We're told at the end of verse 1 that it is a race, a track that is set before us. It's set before us and the one who has laid down the track, the one who has set it down, is God himself. Before time, before the foundation, in eternity, in his sovereign counsel, God mapped out or he designed or he determined everything about what this racetrack would be for your life. Every thorn, every dip, every valley, every mountain top, every curve, everything, he's laid it down eternally in his counsel. Isn't that already, beloved, such a comfort to us? You probably can sit here tonight and say about the circumstances in your life, "I would have had no clue that things going on, perhaps more broadly, but also my life, would be happening. I had no clue that it would happen, let's say, even five years ago." How many things don't come up in our life that are total surprises to us and

yet nothing is a surprise to our God. He's designed the race track in all of its particularities.

Something else that you can say about this track beside the fact that it's set before us by God, is that it is difficult. The track of the Christian life is agony. In fact, the Greek word for "race" is where we get our English word "agony." If you read the Greek word out loud, you could catch that, agony, and doesn't that so well express what the Christian life is? It's not a walk lazily on a sunny day beside a gently rolling stream. This life is agony from many points of view. There are many trials, so many afflictions, difficulties, and obstacles, and thorns, and valleys, dips, and curves. You know that. I know that. The track is hard and that's exactly why the word of God here speaks of patience, that we run with patience the race that is set before us. Patience is a gift of God that he gives to us. It's a steadfastness in running forward, keeping on pressing on, keeping on going. We need patience exactly because it's agony. It's like an earthly runner has perspiration running down his brow. He feels his legs are like jello and his lungs are burning. So spiritually.

The first main element in any earthly race, also the spiritual one, is that there's a track. The second main element in earthly races, but also the spiritual one, is that there are runners. Runners. Verse 1 uses different pronouns here, and it refers to runners, and I'll emphasize them. "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." 2,000 years ago, as I indicated a few moments ago, these runners we described as those Christians that were being persecuted and were tempted to revert back to their Judaism and back to this whole bondage of works righteousness, and those are the ones that he's exhorting. They're the runners. But we can say more. Those who sprint down the track are the church. The body of Christ.

You notice how it speaks of "us" and "we." There's a collection of people. There's a body here. This isn't just a bunch of haphazardly thrown about individuals, one here and one over there and one there, but a body, the church of Christ that's running together. And that too is so comforting, people of God, because it means you never run alone. There are people shoulder-to-shoulder with you, side-by-side, sprinting right alongside. And you say, who are they? These people. Have you ever thought of your fellow church members as fellow runners in the race? We can say about these runners that they are the church and in the same breath, you can say they are the elect. Remember, the text teaches that God has sat down from eternity, he's designed the racetrack itself, and the implication is that he's not only designed the racetrack and laid that down, but he has chosen from eternity in Christ the runners who go on top of that racetrack, his elect people.

And we can say about these runners also, besides that they're the body of Christ, the church, the elect, that they're those to whom God has given the gift of faith. They're not only, we are not only united to Christ with the bond of faith, as a branch is united to the vine and we have his spiritual life coursing through our veins, as it were, giving us strength to run, but we also have the activity of faith which flows out of that bond. So that, verse 2 says, and we'll come back to this, "Looking unto Jesus, the author and

finisher of our faith." The runners are those who have their eye of faith trained on Jesus. They've been given the gift of faith.

Now he says, "That race, run it." Run it, that's the exhortation, and if you want a picture in your mind, especially perhaps for the children, an illustration, don't think of someone who is walking somewhat slowly down a sidewalk. Don't even think of someone who is jogging at medium speed down the road. But envision in your mind someone who is at a dead-on sprint going as fast forward and pressing in that direction as fast as he can go. And now spiritually run the race, and that doesn't, of course, mean that after the worship service we go with our physical legs and we run out of church, that's of course not the meaning, but to run the spiritual race is to live our lives by faith. Why do I say that? Because Hebrews 11 comes right before our text and what does it say there again and again? By faith, So-and-so did this. By faith, So-and-so did that. These Old Testament saints lived their lives by faith, which is just to say whatever they did and wherever they went, they trusted in God. They had a conviction that had been given to them by God, a conviction of things unseen, things, spiritual things that these eyes in the head cannot see. They had a conviction of those things. They lived their lives by faith and so must we.

Running the race, not only is living our lives by faith, but also living in submission to the will of God. I say that because that too comes out of Hebrews 11. Let's just take an example, verses 24 to 26. This is talking about Moses and it says, "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward." Here's Moses. He's just a boy. He's the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. He's living in the palace of Pharaoh as a boy, a young man. Can you imagine what he had? So much wealth, so many opportunities. If he stayed there, think of the open doors for education that he would have in that world power of Egypt. He could have so much but Moses went and left the palace to be among the people of God, those miserable Hebrew slaves outside in submission to the will of God, even though that required great sacrifice and difficulty for him.

That is often, beloved, what it means for you and for me, that we run the race, that we're living in submission to the will of God, even when that requires sacrifice for us. And so, there's my marriage vow. I made a vow before the face of God, and then marriage becomes tough and to be faithful to that vow and carry out the duties that I spoke of is not an easy thing but I must. I must submit to the will of God. And I made vows at my baptism with regard to my children to bring them up in the fear of the Lord and discipline them and teach them, but there are the days when you almost want to pull your hair out. It's hard with the children. Maybe even they're rebelling a little bit. They're not listening. It's a hard day at home, and yet there's that vow, I need to deal with my children in a certain way in submission to the will of God, though that requires sacrifice. And to have a Christian school with tuition and a church budget and all the other things of the kingdom of God, as well as supporting my home, which may very well mean that the lion's share of my income is for those kingdom causes. And I give, and I give, even though it may be to my hurt in submission to the will of God, running the race.

Running the race means, too, suffering persecution. That comes out in that whole matter of Moses, chapter 11, verse 26, "esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt." He was persecuted. And I know that right now in our land we have rather soft persecution, sometimes already it hurts, exclusion in the workplace, not being able to get a job. It's coming though, much severe it is.

He says, "Run." Run, but it's not only running the race as we've described that, but he exhorts us to a certain manner in which we run as well. Middle of verse 1, he says, "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." There are weights. A weight is anything that hinders your forward progress, anything that slows you down as you sprint forward, a kind of encumbrance to your running. That's a weight. If you were at an earthly race, and you're standing by the starting line, and the person walks up that's about to begin the race, and he has boots on, and snow pants, and a big puffy winter coat, you would say to him, "What are you doing? You're about to run a race. You have to take off the boots and the snow pants and the coat and then run." It's the same spiritually. There are certain things that weigh us down that are a hindrance to our running.

What is that for you? Is it, people of God, and I say this to myself too, is it that earthly-mindedness has so seeped into our homes, and maybe not the things that we entertain ourselves with and the things that we do, maybe they're not wrong in themselves, but just to be so absorbed with this earth and the things of this present age, are those waves coming into our homes? What about our phones, if I may become very specific? How much time do I spend on my phone? How absorbed am I with scrolling and scrolling and scrolling? What duties am I laying aside because I'm so attached to this little rectangle in my hand? Are there hindrances to your race?

A specific kind of weight is given also there in the middle of verse 1, "the sin which doth so easily beset us." Besetting sin is literally sin that encircles you and me. It encircles us. So there's a silky, sticky spider web in the corner of a room and a fly comes and he gets stuck in that spider web and that thread goes around, surrounds that fly. He's ensnared in it. And that's, every illustration of course breaks down, but that's something of what besetting sin is. There are certain sins especially that have the ability to control our mind and our heart. Then I have to ask myself and you too, "What are the besetting sins in my life? What are those things that I especially struggle with, and maybe once and in particular, that I'm strongly tempted to day by day and week by week?" That too is a weight in my running. These must be put off. That's what he says, "let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us." Just as we would say to that runner as he comes to the starting line with his boots and snow pants and coat, "Take it off. Throw it aside. Shed yourself of that weight," so also this, renounce the sin. Shed yourself of these weights in your life and me too, put it aside and let us in the power of Jesus Christ run with a wholehearted dedication and devotion toward the goal.

We sure need encouragement then, don't we? Part of that encouragement is given at the beginning of verse 1, "Wherefore seeing, we also are compassed about with so great a

cloud of witnesses." There are witnesses. These witnesses are the people in Hebrews 11, like Abel and Enoch, and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and so on, these Old Testament saints who have already run their race and God has taken them to glory. Those are the witnesses. But you really can broaden that out and say that the witnesses here are any believer throughout history, also the believers that you and I have known personally in our lives, a grandpa, grandma, father, mother, spouse, who has run the race and whom the Lord has taken to glory. Those are the witnesses too.

They're called witnesses for good reason. A misinterpretation of the text is this, that there are these people in heaven like Old Testament saints and believers that we have known, they're in heaven and they're looking down on us and they're watching or witnessing the race that we are running. Some people think of the text that way, but I believe that's wrong interpretation. The correct way to understand it is this: we witness them in the sense that they have left behind a testimony, an example in their life that they lived by the grace of God. We witness, we see, and we think about that testimony and that example that they've left behind and we are cheered on our way as we run our race. In fact, these witnesses are called a great cloud. Just like a puffy white cloud floating in the sky has millions and millions and millions of water droplets and ice crystals, you might say a cloud is a whole mass of water droplets and ice crystals, so also these saints, these witnesses are a mass of people, and they surround us.

And so here we go to that figure I'd like to give you, which I find to be very beautiful. It's like these witnesses are sitting in the seats of a stadium all around us, and we are running on the track inside that stadium, and as we sprint forward, we look at them, we see them, and we're cheered by the example that they've left behind. And so here you are in your running, and you come to a bend in the way, and the future is very uncertain in your life. I know we never know what's going to come even the next second, but there are certain times I think we can all relate to that, that the future can be very, very uncertain. What's going to happen? Become anxious? Fearful? But look, there's Abraham in the seats up there, as it were. We see his testimony left for us on the pages of scripture here in Hebrews 11. Abraham went about not knowing where God was leading him, yet he walked by faith. Maybe in your life right now you're tempted to doubt the promises of God. I think if we all had a few minutes of open confession to each other, we would all have to confess that. Maybe not often, perhaps some more for others but there are times in our life when we are tempted to doubt God's promises. We can be at such a low point. Look, there's Sarah. She is sitting up there and we read of her godly example on the pages of scripture in Hebrews 11, who judged God faithful, who promised to give her seed. And maybe you feel tonight that it's hard even to put just one foot in front of the other with everything going on, and with things in our personal lives, too. I think it's very aptly described our running here below as wearying. It is. It's wearisome. And then you think upon that godly believer you have personally known in your life, who walked by faith, who loved the Lord, who pressed forward by the grace of God, and you are cheered on in your way.

You see, this great cloud of witnesses is such an encouragement to us because they have already run the race. I think sometimes we can think to ourselves, "I'm the first one to

have run this course," and sometimes with specific struggles, "I'm the first one to have gone through this or this is totally unique to me," and that may be true from a certain point of view, no one has specifically gone through this exact situation. We must remember the church. Many saints before us have known the same sorts of valleys and thorns and dips and bends as we do today and as you do. That in itself is encouraging. They've run the race already. But what is most comforting and encouraging is that they've run the course, they've crossed the finish line by the grace of God, and they're in glory. And when I think to myself and you too that the miles are so long and the difficulties are so great, is the end ever going to come? We remember, "I, too, shall cross the finish line as they did, and I, too, shall have glory as they do."

In this race, we have encouragement, especially from Jesus himself and the race that he ran. That's verse 2, "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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus ran his own race. His starting line was the incarnation when the Son of God took to himself flesh. Bethlehem, boyhood, adolescence, teenager, adult, public ministry. He's running and running and running. But what's true of his race is that the wrath of God is coming upon him for our sins and for the sins of all of his people. It's tremendous suffering that we cannot even comprehend. And Jesus' racetrack at the end took a sharp downturn into a deep, dark, gloomy valley, the cross, where his suffering became the most severe. There he is, hanging in those three hours of darkness, all alone, drinking the full cup of the wrath of God down to its bitter dregs. His race has become utterly agonizing, utterly difficult, the pains, the torments, something beloved, to be under the wrath of God, we cannot even begin to comprehend what that's like. His race, especially at the end, as he ran in that darkness, agony.

He knew shame. That's what verse 2 talks about. Shame is pain associated with guilt and humiliation. The shame that Jesus knew was not, of course, associated with his own guilt. He didn't have any of his own guilt. But the shame that Jesus experienced was the shame associated with the sins of his people that were imputed to him. And so here's the sinner-bearer and what do they do? They mock him. They take that crown of thorns and they press it on his brow. And they divide up his garment so that it may have been that Jesus hung on the cross completely or close to completely naked. That's shame.

And the text says he endured the cross all his life long. He ran a straight course toward that accursed tree. He didn't turn to the left. He didn't turn to the right. But he kept straight on and pressed toward there without any wavering. And then when he was actually hanging on the cross suffering for our sins, he refused to come down, but he was patient in his suffering. He stayed on that cross until his course was complete.

And it says here too, he despised the shame of the cross. That means he thought little of it. He regarded it as nothing. There's a glory awaiting him. There's a finish line he's about to cross and that glory is so beautiful and it's so weighty. What is this present shame? What is this suffering? He regarded it as nothing.



Jesus pressed toward the goal, looking constantly toward that which the Father had set before him, that finish line, that joy, that glory and he never became distracted. When Satan came to Jesus at the beginning of his earthly ministry, and he tempted Jesus, one of the ways, and maybe even the main way that you can think about that is this, the devil was trying to get Jesus to swerve off into this thing or that thing. "Doesn't this look good or that? Why don't you go this way?" Any way but toward that cross and toward that goal. Jesus kept straight on and he reached that goal. He crossed the finish line and the word of God says here that he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Crucified, risen, ascended, Lord Jesus Christ now set on the throne of the right hand of God and the man Christ Jesus given authority and power and honor and glory and blessedness. That was glory for him. What a heavy weight that exaltation was, and notice that he sat at the throne of God's right hand. He said on the cross, "It is finished. This atoning suffering, paying for the sins of my people, that is finished." Now that he's crossed the finish line, blissful, everlasting rest from his agonizing race.

As I said, we are encouraged by Jesus and the race that he ran. Be careful. His race is unique and it is different in certain ways than the race we run. He came under the wrath of God, we don't, and that's our great comfort, isn't it? His sufferings were atoning sufferings. Ours are not. So our race is different in important respects but yet, with that being said, his running and his race was agonizing and so is ours in some respects. He kept his eye on the goal, as we must, and the end for him was glory, as it will be for us. To him look, runners. Look. In him is the only strength that there is, the only possibility for sprinting down the track.

When I was in cross country in Covenant, the coach would say, probably did more than once, "Don't look down. Don't look at yourself. Don't look at the ground. Don't look over here at what's going on the side of the racetrack. Don't look over here. Just keep your eyes up and keep them ahead and keep focused on the finish line to come." Isn't that so true for the spiritual race as well? Verse 2 at the beginning says, "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." Looking, that's the activity of faith, trusting in Jesus, relying upon Jesus, keeping that eye of faith upon him. He's the author of that faith. By his own race that he ran, he purchased for us this faith. He earned it. And by his Spirit who enters into us, he works that faith, but also week by week and even day by day, he strengthens that faith. Yes, he's the author of it but he's the finisher too. He brings it to the goal and he does that, beloved, when he makes our faith sight.

Crossing the finish line and coming into glory, can you imagine, can you even begin to imagine what that's going to be like in a moment to see Jesus face-to-face full on in all of his beauty and glory and riches, and to look upon the precious face of our Savior with rapturous delight forever? "What a day that will be when my Jesus I shall see." We run, now the eye of faith upon him. You know, don't you, I know, don't I, of ourselves, there is no power to press forward, and of ourselves there is no strength to cast off that weight and that besetting sin. Don't look here. Don't look anywhere else at the things of this earth, but only at him where there's abundant grace and abundant strength for the race that we run. Let us look to him, not with a few glances now and again, but let us run the entirety of our race with the eye of faith steadily on him. Amen.

*Strengthen our legs, O God, to press forward and with steadfastness to sprint the track which thou hast designed for us and laid out before us, and keep the eye of faith trained upon our Savior. And Lord, give to us a strong hope tonight of the glory that awaits when Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith, will bring us across that finish line and bring us to be with himself where there is rest forever in his glorious presence. For Jesus' sake, we pray this. Amen.*