

8/9/26**Run Your Race*****Hebrews 12:1-13*****Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

I grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, less than a half mile from Beacon Street and the route of the Boston Marathon. In April of 1980, when I was 15 years old and a sophomore in high school, I watched the Boston Marathon, as many people do. By the time people get to that part of Brookline, they've run more than 22 miles, and it's obvious how hard it is to run that far. So, it was even more amazing to see a man, not just running, himself, but pushing a younger man in a wheelchair. There had to be a story behind that – why would a man push someone in a wheelchair for more than 26 miles? That was the beginning of what became a well-known Boston story – Dick Hoyt pushing his son, Rick, in every Boston Marathon, beginning in 1980, for more than 30 years, until Rick was in his fifties and his dad was in his seventies! Team Hoyt began in 1977, when 15-year-old Rick, who was paralyzed at birth, told his dad he wanted to participate in a 5-mile run to benefit a lacrosse player who had been paralyzed.

After running Boston in 1980, Dick and Rick completed an amazing number of marathons and triathlons, including six Ironman competitions — that's a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, followed by the 26.2-mile marathon. Dick would pull his son in a boat during the swimming portion, and he had a special seat for him on his bicycle. They did it all for the Hoyt Foundation, the father and son's charitable foundation that advocates for the inclusion of people with disabilities in all facets of society. Team Hoyt became a beloved fixture of the Boston Marathon, running the race almost every year, and completing it 32 times. At age 75, father and son decided that the 2013 Boston Marathon would be their last long-distance race together. That year, a bronze statue of the Hoyts was erected near the Boston Marathon's starting line, including a plaque that reads, "Yes You Can!" When that race was halted by the bombings at the finish line, they chose to run one more time – in 2014.

Overall, the two ran more than 1000 races together, and they were inducted into the Ironman Hall of Fame and honored with ESPN's Jimmy V Award for Perseverance. The kind of love, dedication, and perseverance it takes, not only to train yourself to run races as long as marathons and even to do triathlons, but to do it with and for your child, is truly inspiring. Dick said, in a 2013 interview with Stride Nation, "I got a

motivator, and that's my son. He's the one that motivates me and inspires me. With him being out there, we've never had the thoughts or any ideas of giving up and quitting any races that we've been involved in. It's just amazing." We can learn a lot from that kind of devotion and dedication. Dick died five years ago – on March 17, 2021, at the age of 80 – and, perhaps not surprisingly, Rick died just over two years after his dad – on May 22, 2023, at the age of 61 – after the two of them inspired tens of thousands of people with their love and perseverance.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks to the importance and value of perseverance, as we heard three weeks ago. As we've journeyed through Hebrews, we've noted that we don't know who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, but we do know something about the people to whom it was first written. We know that some of them were **weakening in faith and wavering in their commitment to live out what they claimed to believe**. They weren't running strong, they were staggering, and their knees were getting weak. In **Hebrews 10:32-39**, we learned that some of them had been subject to imprisonment, and others had their property taken, because of their faith. These sorts of things are still being experienced by Christians in some parts of the world, today. Regardless of what the audience of Hebrews has been through, **they're encouraged to persevere in faith until the Lord returns**. As an encouragement, *Hebrews 11* lists many of the great heroes and heroines of the Hebrew scriptures who are examples of perseverance and role models of living faithfully, and we were reminded of some of their stories over the last two Sundays. Then, chapter 12 begins:

"Therefore, **since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and **let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us**, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, **so that you may not grow weary or lose heart**. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children – "My child, do not regard lightly the **discipline** of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord **disciplines** those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts." Endure trials for the sake of

discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not **discipline**? If you do not have that **discipline** in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to **discipline** us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they **disciplined** us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he **disciplines** us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, **discipline** always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been **trained by it**. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”

I love the image that begins *Hebrews 12*, “***Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.***” We’re here, today, worshiping God in a Christian Church, because of the faithfulness of the women and men who have gone before us and persevered in the faith and in doing good in Jesus’ name. When you consider how the Way of Jesus began, with a small group of fishermen and ordinary folks, it’s remarkable to think that now there are disciples of Jesus all around the world. The first disciples couldn’t keep their experience of Jesus to themselves. Everywhere they went – crossing barriers of race, culture, class, and gender – they bore witness to the good news that there was forgiveness of sins, life transforming power, and a new sense of identity, community, and purpose, available through Jesus Christ. We’re here today, because, for almost 2,000 years, faithful Christians have been effective witnesses in telling others about Jesus.

Every living follower of Christ has been fortunate to come to faith because others, in previous generations, have been faithful witnesses. Hopefully, all of us could identify members of our family, Sunday School teachers, Pastors, Youth Group leaders, camp counselors, or friends, who shared about Jesus and helped us along the road of faith. These people are special to us, and we’re grateful for them – and many of them are now part of that great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on. At the same time, we need to remember that the Lord calls us to be loving, faithful witnesses of Jesus for other people, as well.

Surrounded – and cheered on by – a great cloud of witnesses, it’s now our turn, and we’re told to “*Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and **let us***

run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” Nobody running – and trying to win a race – would want to be encumbered with extra weight or anything that would slow us down. Runners, today, tend to wear light, aerodynamic clothing. If we’re going to run the race of faith, we need to leave behind things that would slow us down and prevent us from running freely and unencumbered. Each of us must ask and answer the question for ourselves – what is it in me, in my life, that’s preventing me from running freely with Jesus? Is there sin in my life that I need to confess, repent, and leave behind?

Each of us also must run the race **set before us**. We don’t get to – nor do we have to – run someone else’s race, even if we might want to. We must run the race that’s set before us. Jill and I enjoy watching Track and Field – including the Olympics, the Diamond League, and the NCAA championships. There are all kinds of races – 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1500m, 5000m, 10000m, 3000m steeplechase; there are hurdles and relays of various lengths; and finally, the marathon. Each competitor trains for his or her race. Sprinters train differently than middle distance runners, who train differently than those running the longest distances. The race of life is an ultramarathon, and unlike the Olympics or Boston – where everyone runs the same route – **in life, each of our courses is unique.**

We want to leave every weight and sin behind us because the race of life is not easy – it’s hard, there are hills, and it requires perseverance. The New Testament tells us we need to be resilient because the trials and tests of life will challenge us to our core.

We’re told **the way to persevere** is to keep ***“Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross.”*** Jesus is the forerunner – or the trailblazer – of our faith, and the finisher; he is the first and the last; he is the matchless example we’re to follow every moment of life as best as we can. And as our example, he endured the suffering of the cross because of the joy that lay beyond it.

“Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.” We’re told to expect life to be hard, that we will face hostility, and there will be times when we may be tempted to grow weary or lose heart. **When we’re feeling weary or losing heart, it’s helpful to remember what the Bible tells us.**

James 1:12, “*Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*”

Galatians 6:9-10, “*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.*”

Luke 21:19, “*By your endurance you will gain your souls.*”

When you think your race of faith is too hard, and you’re struggling to endure what you’re facing, remember **Hebrews 12:4** says, “*In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*” Countless Christians, through the centuries, have done precisely that. It’s not just an ancient struggle; there are still Christians who are martyred, around the world. Through the worst adversity imaginable, ordinary people have kept looking to Jesus, and running the race of faith. To run well requires discipline.

Discipline is the key word in Hebrews 12:5-11. The Greek word translated as “discipline” in *Hebrews 12* is **paideia** (noun, παιδεία), and its related verb **paideuō** (παιδεύω). Rooted in the word for a child (*pais*), it broadly means child-training, raising, instruction, education, and corrective guidance, rather than punishment. Forms of this word appear eight to ten times in *Hebrews 12:5-11*, to reframe believers’ hardships as a loving parent’s care and mentoring.

In the broader Greek world, *paideia* was the entire system of shaping a person — culture-building, instruction, and growing a child into a mature adult. It includes reproof, guidance, and boundaries when a child strays, but **its goal is character development**, not harm or vindictive anger. In *Hebrews 12:7-8*, enduring this training shows the proof of our relationship with God, that God treats believers as true, legitimate children — a parent doesn’t tend to spend time correcting kids that aren’t theirs.

The writer of *Hebrews* is saying that God lovingly disciplines his children **to train them to become spiritual champions**. God’s discipline is meant to draw us away from what will cause us harm, and to lead us, instead, into growing in the likeness

of Jesus. It's a spiritual maturing process that God allows us to experience, to become like Christ.

Now, it's our turn to carry the baton of faith in Jesus. At the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, the highly favored US men's 4x100m relay team suffered a botched exchange between Christian Coleman and Kenneth Bednarek, resulting in a disqualification – mirroring a similar handoff meltdown at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, involving Fred Kerley and Ronnie Baker. As Christians in the 21st century, we're now taking our turn running our race of faith. Every Christian who ran the race before us, over 2,000 years, is now part of the crowd of witnesses cheering us on, as we strive to run our race. As awful as a runner at the Olympics feels if he botches the exchange or drops the baton in a relay race, at least they did everything possible to train to be ready, and they're willing to take the baton and run with it. How much worse is it to be unwilling to run, unwilling to take the baton?

Whether we realize it or not, there is an intense competition going on in the world, and there are others who are fiercely committed, training hard, and determined to give their all, so their team can win. **The world is the competition of ideas to gain adherents.** If you don't think so, whatever you believe, and value, and hope continues in the world, is in jeopardy.

In Basilica San Clemente in Rome, three floors below the street, you can see an ancient worship space dedicated to Mithraism – a popular mystery religion in Rome, where they'd sacrifice a bull and sprinkle those gathered with blood – and just across the narrow alley space was the location of one of the first house churches in Rome. Talk about competition.

The church of Jesus Christ is always a generation away from extinction. It doesn't matter how well Jesus, Mary, Peter, Mark, Paul, Priscilla, Lydia, and Christ followers through the centuries ran their races of faith; their turn on the track is over. The question is, what are you prepared to do? Are you willing to take the baton of faith and run with perseverance, energy, focus, and all the determination and love you've got, motivated by the example of Jesus, and encouraged by the crowd of faithful witnesses cheering you on, as you run your race? Run in God's name and for God's glory, as long as you have breath, until you cross the finish line of faith.

Blessing: *Hebrews 6:10-12*,

*“For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work
and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.
And we want each one of you to show the same diligence
so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end,
so that you may not become sluggish,
but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What are some things — good things or bad things — that can weigh us down, or keep us from faithfully running the race God has given us (v. 1)?
2. The passage tells us to “fix our eyes on Jesus” (v. 2). What does it practically look like to keep our focus on Jesus when we’re tired, discouraged, distracted, or facing difficulties?
3. *Hebrews* describes Jesus enduring the cross because of “the joy set before him” (v. 2). How does having a clear picture of the hope ahead help us persevere through present struggles?
4. *Hebrews 12:5-11* describes God’s discipline as part of God’s loving relationship with God’s children. How do you respond when you experience hardship? How can we learn to see challenges as opportunities for God’s growth and shaping in our lives?
5. “*Strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet*” (vv. 12–13). What are some practical ways we can strengthen our own faith and help others keep running when they are struggling?
6. Looking back at the “*great cloud of witnesses*” in *Hebrews 11*, and then at Jesus in *Hebrews 12*, who has been an example of perseverance in your faith journey? What have you learned from watching them run their race?