

# “THE RACE THAT IS SET BEFORE US”

## (12:1–17)

The apostle Paul often used athletic terminology in his epistles (1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Philippians 3:13, 14; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7). In 12:1–17, he compared the Christian life to a foot race. This is obvious in verses 1 through 3 and in verses 12 and 13. However, as we shall see, each of these seventeen verses relates to that theme, either directly or indirectly. To run the Christian race victoriously, we must meet several requirements.

### NEEDED: ENDURANCE (12:1–4)

In chapter 10 the writer said, “You have need of endurance” (v. 36a).<sup>1</sup> In chapter 11 he gave examples of men and women of faith who endured regardless of their circumstances. Chapter 12 begins with additional exhortations for endurance. (Notice the words “endurance” [v. 1], “endured” [v. 2], and “not grow weary” [v. 3].)<sup>2</sup>

Verse 1 pictures a race track, with a grandstand full of people watching the race. These “witnesses” are the heroes of faith in chapter 11. They are not literally looking down on us from heaven. “It is *as though* they are watching and cheering us on, saying, ‘Finish the race!’”<sup>3</sup>

### The Race Set Before Us (12:1, 2a)

In order to endure and finish the race, we must do at least three things:

*Lay aside anything that slows us down.* Runners sometimes wear weights while training to

build up strength. These weights are removed for the race itself.

*Determine to “run with endurance.”* The Christian race is not a short-distance sprint, but a marathon. Before we start the race, we must determine to finish it.

*Focus on the goal.* The serious runner does not look at the crowd or the other contestants. The text emphasizes that our eyes should be fixed on Jesus.

### The Example Set Before Us (12:2b–4)

Jesus had a more challenging race to run than any of us will ever have, a more difficult course than any of us can imagine. The writer noted that Jesus had shed His blood, while these readers had not (v. 4). Jesus was able to endure the cross because He looked past the shame and the agony to the finish line: the “joy” of sitting down “at the right hand of the throne of God.” If we seriously “consider” Christ’s example, we will not “grow weary and lose heart.”

### NEEDED: DISCIPLINE (12:4–11)

Verses 4 through 11 discuss the discipline of the Lord. In the next lesson, we will look at those verses in more detail. For the moment, I want to tie this passage with the topic of the Christian race.

### Themes Continued

Verse 3 in the previous section concluded with the exhortation not to “grow weary and lose heart.” That theme is continued in verse 5: The Old Testament passage quoted (Proverbs 3:11, 12) urges, “Do not . . . faint.” Further, the theme of *endurance* is continued in verse 7. Verse 11 uses

<sup>1</sup>See the notes on the word “endurance” in “You Can Do It!” in this series of lessons.

<sup>2</sup>Notice also the use of the word “endure” in 12:7.

<sup>3</sup>Neil R. Lightfoot, ACU extension class on Hebrews taught in Fort Worth, Texas, 26 October 1985.

athletic terminology. The Greek word translated “trained” (“exercised thereby”; KJV) is the word from which we get “gymnasium.”

### **Discipline Emphasized**

Anyone who has seriously played any sport knows how essential discipline is. As I think about discipline and athletic endeavors, my mind goes back to grueling football practices under a searing Oklahoma sun. Did the coach subject us to exhausting (and sometimes painful) drills just to be mean to us? No, he did it because he wanted us to do our best to be victorious.

Many Jews believed, as some people do today, that experiencing good times is a sign of God’s favor, while bad times indicate that He is displeased. This letter to the Hebrews said, in effect, “That is not true. The trouble you are undergoing does not show that God does not love you. Rather, it shows that He *does* love you.” Troublesome times are never enjoyable, but we need them if we are to grow stronger, if we are going to be able to finish the race!

### **NEEDED: PROPER PRIORITIES (12:12–17)**

It is obvious how verses 12 and 13 relate to the theme of a race; it is not as obvious how verses 14 through 17 are relevant.<sup>4</sup> All these verses, however, emphasize the need for having the right *priorities*. To be an outstanding athlete, one must prioritize his life; he must carefully control the use of his time, what he does and does not eat, his sleeping habits, and so on. True priorities are essential for those who are determined to succeed in running the Christian race. The previous section, 12:4–11, discussed discipline from without (from God); verses 12 and 13 establish the need for discipline from within (self-discipline) (see 1 Corinthians 9:25a, 26a, 27).

### **Falter or Finish? (12:12, 13)**

Verses 12 and 13 have two pieces of advice for the runner. (1) *Don’t quit*. The middle part of the race is often the most challenging—when exhaustion and aching muscles threaten to overwhelm the contestant. That is when he must remember the priority of finishing the race and

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<sup>4</sup>They do, however, begin with the word “pursue” which evokes an image of someone moving forward rapidly.

not growing weary (see Galatians 6:9). (2) *Keep going straight ahead*. Verse 13 uses phrasing from Proverbs 4:26. Look at the quotation in the context of Proverbs 4:25–27. No runner could be successful if he veered back and forth from one side of the track to the other.

### **Hinder or Help? (12:14–16a)**

In verses 14 through 16, we again find an emphasis on keeping our eyes on the goal: to “see the Lord” and to receive “the grace of God.” The verses mention a number of hindrances to finishing the race: disharmony, a lack of sanctification, bitterness, immorality, and ungodliness.

An added emphasis is seen in these verses: the need to help other Christians so we can all run the race well.<sup>5</sup> The Christian race is different from secular track events. In those it is “every man for himself,” which is not the case in Christian living. I am reminded of a Special Olympics<sup>6</sup> race that was featured in the news. During that race, one runner fell. Everyone else in the race stopped, ran back to the fallen runner, and picked him up. Then they all started running again. You and I need to “encourage one another and build up one another” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

### **Here or Hereafter? (12:16, 17)**

Many are completely focused on this life, with little or no concern for the life to come. As an athlete trains, he must deny himself some things *now* in order to achieve victory *later*. He must work out his priorities; like Moses, he must take the long view (see Hebrews 11:24–26). Esau is one who did *not* take the long view (Genesis 25:29–34). He is a striking example of the consequences of having wrong priorities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In secular track events, only one runner wins (1 Corinthians 9:24); but in the Christian race, we are not competing against one another. Rather, we are all striving to be what we ought to be, with God’s help. Everyone can be a “winner.” I pray that God will help each of us work out the priorities in our lives, to “put first things first” (see

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<sup>5</sup>Some think this is also emphasized in verses 12 and 13.

<sup>6</sup>“Special Olympics” is an event which features athletic competitions for those who are handicapped in some way.

Matthew 6:33). If we get our priorities right, then we will be able, as Paul was, to finish “the race” (2 Timothy 4:7; NIV). A runner who won a secular race in New Testament times received “a perishable wreath [of laurel],” but we will receive “an imperishable” crown (1 Corinthians 9:25; see 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10).

### **NOTES FOR THE TEACHER**

If you use this lesson as a sermon, you will want to emphasize that—in order to be crowned a victor—a runner must compete “according to the rules” (2 Timothy 2:5) and must run on the right

track. Tell your listeners how to qualify for the Christian race (Galatians 3:26, 27) and where one must be in order to run the race (in the church; Ephesians 5:25–27).

Having right priorities is so important that you may want to teach a separate lesson on priorities from verses 14 through 17. You could spend more time on the specific instructions in those verses, each of which should be part of the priorities in our lives. The passage closes with the classic example of Esau, whose priorities were seriously flawed.

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