

# THE GREAT CHRISTIAN RACE

## HEBREW 12:01–04

### *Introduction*

This is one of the most stirring passages in Scripture, a passage that is written for the purpose of stirring us to run and to keep on running in the Christian race of life. What is the Christian race? It can be described in many ways.

- => It is the race for heaven.
- => It is the race for life, for both abundant and eternal life.
- => It is the race to live with God forever.
- => It is the race for perfection, a perfect life and world in which there is no suffering, corruption, evil, suffering or death.
- => It is the race for righteousness and justice — for a perfect world of godliness.
- => It is the race for the promised land, the eternal land where we can live forever with God.
- => It is the race to live in the new heavens and earth with God forever and ever.
- => It is the race to know God, to commune and fellowship with God both now and forever.

This is the great Christian race, the great goal toward which believers are running.

They believe in God and in His great promise of living with Him forever and ever; they believe in God's glorious promise of a new heavens and earth that shall be perfected eternally. Believers know that if they endure to the end, they shall be escorted into the very presence of God where they shall live with God forever and ever; and from there, they shall await the glorious day of redemption, the day when the heavens and earth shall be remade and perfected forever. Believers know that God's promise to Old Testament believers — the promise of the promised land — shall become a living reality. How do believers know this — know it beyond question? By the Promised Seed, even by the Lord Jesus Christ. The Promised Seed has come, and He has died for our sins and been raised again for our justification. Therefore, we shall live forever in the promised land of God's glorious presence — live forever in heaven and in His love, worship and service. The goal of the Christian race is so wonderful a promise that we could go on and talk and talk about it. But the point of the present passage demands our attention: the great Christian race lies out before us. Therefore, it needs to be studied and understood by all who are willing to run it, and all need to run it.

- I. Its inspiration: a great cloud of witnesses (v. 1).
  - II. Its required disciplines (v. 1).
  - III. Its supreme example: Jesus (v. 2).
  - IV. Its controlling factor: staying one's mind on Jesus' endurance (v. 3).
  - V. Its great demand: resisting temptation — even to blood (v. 4).
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## ***I. Hebrews 12:01 The Inspiration of the Great Cloud of Witnesses***

There is the inspiration of the Christian race — a great cloud of witnesses. The picture is that of a race. The scene is a great coliseum filled to capacity with spectators (“great cloud”). The race is about to begin. Two quick exhortations are given: get rid of all excess weight and clinging entanglements and run and run and keep on running — enduring to the end. As you run, remember Jesus (v. 2). He formerly participated, and He participated for the joy of winning. He disciplined Himself, endured to the point of death. And He received His reward.

The picture painted by the author shows there are two senses in which the crowd witnesses the great Christian race. The crowd, the heroes of chapter eleven, has participated in the race. They have run and finished the race themselves — enduring to the end and winning. Therefore, they are witnesses and examples for us. But they are not only participants, they are also spectators. They actually witness our race and performance. They are vitally interested in how we run the race.

The point is this: a great cloud of witnesses surrounds and envelops us — witnesses who believed God and stood fast for God — stood fast against all kinds of trials, temptations and opposition. Their great faith and endurance should stir and inspire us to believe and to endure in our belief. They never buckled or crumbled in their faith.

- => They endured against great temptation — against looking, touching, tasting, doing, thinking, feeling and saying anything that would hinder their running the race. They did not give in to temptation — not for long — not as a lifestyle — not permanently. They endured in faith.
- => They endured against great trials — against problems, trouble, sufferings, loss, hunger, disease, accident, mockery, abuse, persecution, threats and even in the face of martyrdom. No matter how terrible or awful the trial, they endured in faith — believing in God and His glorious promises.
- => They endured against all opposition — against opposition from family, friends, neighbours, fellow-workers, civil leaders and even institutional religionists. No matter the opposition, they believed God and endured in their faith in God and in His Word of promise.

Again, the point is this: their faith and their endurance should stir and inspire us to believe God and to run holding fast to our belief.

## ***II. Hebrews 12:01 The Christian Race Required Discipline***

There are the required disciplines of the Christian race. They are twofold.

1. We must lay aside every weight and lay aside the sin that so easily trips us. The words “throw off” (*apothemenoi*) mean to take off, strip off and to remove as in taking off clothes.

a. The Christian runner must strip off “everything that hinders” (ogkon panta). This means any excess weight and bulk of body. All serious athletes train and strain to remove all excess weight. This refers to things that may be legitimate and innocent in and of themselves, but they hinder the Christian runner. They hamper and slow him down instead of helping him run faster. What kind of things would these be? What are some legitimate and innocent things, things that do not help a believer to grow and run the race as fast as he can?

=> Seeking entertainment instead of fellowshiping and communing with God — instead of praying and reading our Bibles — instead of worshipping and witnessing. Recreation is sometimes needed, but the problem with most of us is that we relax and rest far more than we need, and we neglect our fellowship and communion with God and our intercessory prayer for others. Too many of us do not even know how to spend long times keeping our minds upon God and communing with Him.

=> Seeking the possessions and things of this world instead of seeking God.

=> Listening to music and other sounds that do not build up our spirits nor focus our minds upon the truth and God. Watching films and television that fail to strengthen us.

We could go on and on, but the thrust is edification. Anything that does not build us up and make us stronger is excess weight that slows us down. The Christian runner must do exactly what the Olympic runner does: strain to remove all excess weight. Do nothing — absolutely nothing — that hinders or hampers him from running at full speed. He must strip off all unnecessary weight.

*Mat 19:21-23* Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

*Luke 9:57-62* As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

*Heb 12:1* 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.

*Gen 19:26* But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

b. The Christian runner must strip off the sin which so easily trips or entangles him. The words “easily entangles” (euperistaton) mean the sin which clings, distracts and trips

up the Christian runner. It is the picture of clothing flapping around a person while he is running: it entangles and trips him and he falls. What is the sin that entangles and trips believers? Various sins have been suggested as common to all believers. However, the exhortation speaks strongly to every believer and to the particular sin that entangles and throws him. Each one of us must ask: What is the sin that so easily trips me? Pleasure, indulgence, the tongue, the flesh, pride, possessions, worldly friends, television, sports — what is it that consumes my energy and keeps me from following God fully and wholly — that trips me up far, far too often? We must strip it off or else it will entangle us and trip us up and we will never finish the race.

**Job 11:14** *If you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent.*

**Isa 55:7** *Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

**Eph 4:22** *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.*

**Heb 12:1** *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.*

**1 Pet 2:11** *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.*

**Rom 6:12** *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.*

**1 Cor 15:34** *Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God — I say this to your shame.*

**1 John 2:1-2** *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

**Isa 1:16** *Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong.*

- 2 We must run with perseverance (hupomone). The word means endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, constancy. The word patience is not passive; it is active. It is not the spirit that just sits back and puts up with the trials of life, taking whatever may come. Rather it is the spirit that stands up and faces the trials of life, that actively goes about conquering and overcoming them. When trials confront a man who is truly justified, he is stirred to arise and face the trials head on. He immediately sets out to conquer and overcome them. He knows that God is allowing the trials in order to teach him more and more perseverance (endurance).

The Christian runner must be determined; he must have true grit. He must be filled with steadfast endurance, letting nothing stop or hinder him, not any...

- sin
- enticing chance
- desire
- luring invitation
- appealing attraction
- lust
- worldly potential
- distraction
- daring challenge
- enticement

**Rom 12:12** *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*

**Heb 10:36** *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*

**James 1:2-4** *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

**James 5:7** *Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.*

### III. **Hebrews 12:02 The Supreme Example of Jesus Christ**

There is the supreme example of the Christian race — the Lord Jesus Christ. Believers who have trusted God and endured in their faith are great examples for us. We have seen this in the Great Hall of Faith in chapter eleven. And we see it in the example of believers all around us — believers who really live for Christ. But as great as these examples are, there is one supreme example of faith, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ. We may and should look at the example of other believers, but we should always fix (aphorontes) our eyes on Jesus. The word means to fix your eyes upon Jesus. It also means to fix your mind upon Him (Kenneth Wuest. *Hebrews*, Vol. 2, p. 214). The Christian runner is to focus his eyes and mind upon Jesus Christ. Why? Because Jesus Christ Himself ran the race of faith when He was upon earth, and He shows us exactly how to run it. We should remember four things about the race He ran.

1. Jesus Christ participated in the race Himself; He actually ran the race of faith. In fact, He is the very Author and Perfecter of faith.
- => The Author (ton archegon) means that He authored, began, originated, created and gave birth to the Christian race.
- => The Perfecter (teleioten) means that He perfected, completed and consummated the race. He ran the race to the finish.

The idea is that Jesus Christ ran the course of life perfectly. He was sinless, perfectly righteous, always obeying God in everything. He ran the race of faith — of utter obedience and trust in God — all through His life upon earth. He finished His course

living a perfect and righteous life upon earth. Therefore, He created and authored and completed the Christian race for all believers. He is the blazing example of faith in God — of utter dependence, obedience and righteousness — for the believer. The believer is always to be looking to Jesus the Author and Perfecter of faith.

**Heb 3:1** *Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.*

**Heb 12:2** *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

**1 Pet 2:21** *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

2. Jesus Christ had a great inspiration: the joy that was set before Him. What was that joy? The glorious day of redemption...
  - the glorious day when He would be united and exalted with all believers of all ages.
  - the glorious day when He would realize all the glory and joy for which He had died and for which God had purposed His death.
  - the glorious day when the new heavens and earth would be recreated and all the redeemed would be worshipping and serving God as all in all.
  - the glorious day when the salvation of all believers of all generations would be completely and perfectly fulfilled, and He and all those who loved Him would be ruling and reigning with Him forever and ever.

There are many ways to express the joy that was set before Christ, but the thing to see is that it was the joy of redemption — of God’s very purpose for the world — that stirred and motivated Christ to come to earth and author salvation for man.

**Thought 1.** The glorious day of redemption should stir and motivate us as well. Christ our Lord is our supreme example in being stirred by the joy that lies before us.

**Luke 10:21** *At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.”*

**Luke 15:5** *“And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders.”*

**John. 15:11** *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*

**John 17:13** *“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.”*

**Rom 14:17** *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

**Heb 12:2** *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

3. Jesus Christ is the supreme example in discipline: He followed the rules of the race even to the point of dying in order to create the race. He obeyed God perfectly. He ignored and despised the shame of the cross in order to finish the race of perfect obedience to God. And because He was perfectly obedient, He has blazed the path of perfect righteousness, of the very faith that makes us acceptable to God. The Christian race exists because Jesus Christ disciplined Himself; He obeyed God perfectly, even to the extent of dying for us. This He willingly did, and because He did, He is the supreme example for us. We should endure in believing and obeying God no matter the cost or price we have to pay, even if it means martyrdom.

**John 10:11** *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

**Rom 5:6** *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*

**1 Cor 15:3** *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.*

**Gal 1:4** *Who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.*

**Gal 3:13** *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”*

**Eph 5:2** *And live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

**Heb 2:9** *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

**1 Pet 2:24** *“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”*

**1 Pet 3:18** *For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.*

4. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of receiving the reward of faith. He was exalted to the right hand of the throne of God. Believers witnessed His ascension and several believers have seen Him in visions and dreams since then (cp. Acts 1:9f; 7:55f; 9:3f).

**Mat 16:19** *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

**Luke 22:69** “But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.”

**Acts 2:36** “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

**Eph 1:20** Which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.

**Eph 1:22** And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.

**Phil 2:9** Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

**1 Pet 3:22** Who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

**Rev 5:12** In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!”

#### **IV. Hebrews 12:03 The Controlling Factor: Staying One’s Mind on Jesus’ Endurance**

There is the controlling factor of the Christian race — keeping or staying one’s mind on the endurance of Jesus Christ. The word “consider” (*analogizomai*) means to compare, reckon, count up, weigh. Believers are to focus upon Jesus Christ and His sufferings and compare and weigh them against their sufferings. Christ endured so much more than we have to endure. Let any orphan, widow, criminal, prostitute, slave, or sufferer — any person whatsoever compare himself with all this, and remember Jesus bore all this:

- => being born to an unwed mother (Mat 1:18-19).
- => being born in a stable, the worst of conditions (Luke 2:7).
- => being born to poor parents (Luke 2:24).
- => having his life threatened as a baby (Mat 2:13f).
- => being the cause of unimaginable sorrow (Mat 2:16f).
- => having to be moved and shifted as a baby (Mat 2:13f).
- => being reared in a despicable place, Nazareth (Luke 2:39).
- => having His father die during His youth (see note, pt. 3, Mat 13:53-58).
- => having to support His mother, brothers and sisters (see note, pt. 3, Mat 13:53-58).
- => having no home, not even a place to lay His head (Mat 8:20; Luke 9:58).
- => being hated and opposed by religionists (Mark 14:1-2).
- => being charged with insanity (Mark 3:21).
- => being charged with demon possession (Mark 3:22).

- => being opposed by His own family (Mark 3:31-32).
- => being rejected, hated and opposed by audiences to whom He spoke (Mat 13:53-58; Luke 4:28-29).
- => being betrayed by a close friend (Mark 14:10-11, 18).
- => being left alone, rejected and forsaken by all His friends (Mark 14:50).
- => being tried before the high court of the land on the charge of treason (John 18:33).
- => being executed by crucifixion, the worst possible death (John 19:16f).

Note why we should compare our sufferings with the suffering of Christ. It keeps us from becoming weary, that is, exhausted, tired, worn out and relaxing when we should be working; and it also keeps us from losing heart and becoming discouraged and despondent, from shrinking back and giving up.

*Mat 10:22* “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

*Mat 11:29* “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

*Gal 5:7* You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?

*Gal 6:6* Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.

*Eph 6:10-12* Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

*Phil 3:14* I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

*2 Tim 4:7* I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

*1 Pet 1:13* Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

*1 Pet 2:19* For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

## **V. *Hebrews 12:04 The Great Demand of the Christian Race: Resist Temptation, Even to Blood***

There is the great demand of the Christian race — to resist temptation even to the point of blood. This is the picture of Christ’s ordeal in Gethsemane and upon the cross. He struggled against the temptation to choose some other way other than the cross, but He

endured to the point of blood in both experiences (cp. Mat 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-53).

The point is both striking and powerful: we must resist temptation...

- to the point of sweating blood if necessary.
- to the point of death.

**1 Cor 9:25** *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.*

**1 Cor 10:13** *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

**2 Tim 4:6-8** *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

**Heb 12:4** *In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

**James 1:12** *Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial [trial], because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

**1 Pet 1:6-7** *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ■*