



# THE CHRISTIAN'S MARATHON

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*By the Book*™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries

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## Let's Begin

*The notable Bible commentator, William Barclay, once said, "It would be a great thing to die knowing that we had never transgressed the rules of honor in the race of life." Barclay was alluding to the words of the author of Hebrews, "let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (v. 1c). Life is surely a race, but it is more; it is a marathon.*

*While a race could be from one end of a room to the other, a marathon is a race requiring exceptional endurance because of its exceptional duration. And, the duration for the Christian's marathon is his or her entire life!*

*Understanding the nature of the believer's spiritual marathon is crucial if he or she is to press on to spiritual maturity. The Hebrews author assists us in making sense of our personal race in life by explaining three features of the spiritual marathon, features which make up the outline below:*

- I. The Origin of the Marathon (vv. 1-3)**
- II. The Obstacles to the Marathon (vv. 4-13)**
- III. The Outcome of the Marathon (vv. 14-29)**

## I. The Origin of the Marathon (vv. 1-3)

The New Testament offers a variety of metaphors which describe the spiritual progress of the Christian life: physical birth, soldiers, sheep, branches, and gardens among other images. The singular point of every metaphor the New Testament offers is to keep the Christian moving along in the progress of his or her Christian life. The author sums it up well earlier, "let us go on" (6:1).

In chapter 12, the author begins with the image of a runner moving along the course of a marathon. And, in order to prod the Christian to continue running toward the finish line, he offers two means of inspiration. First, he inspires us by *encouraging* us. Note his words well, "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," (v. 1). The term translated "wherefore" is a word which gives

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away the author's purpose. In essence, he is saying, "Listen up. This is the climax of my entire message to you!" Gaining his hearers' attention, he shocks them with a stirring revelation—as we run, we are "surrounded" by a "cloud of witnesses" who have already run the race before us. Referring back to chapter 11 and the "hall of faith" the author penetrates the hearts of his hearers by appealing to a stadium filled with an audience of inspiration, cheering us on to run our race well! As spectators offer their encouraging applause, our spiritual adrenalin rushes through our veins keeping us on track no matter what difficulties come our way. In short, the author employs encouragement to inspire faithfulness to the Lord Jesus.

Not only the sheer *experience* of the spectators enriches our journey of faith, but also their seasoned *expertise* remains just as helpful. The "cloud" refers to the number of witnesses, while the sin which "so easily besets us" prepares us to deal with potential obstacles which slow us down in our spiritual progress. In other words, the witnesses are not just spectators; rather they are our standard. The witnesses guide us on our journey. How can they do so? They have walked where we now walk; sit where we now sit; and run where we now run.



Additionally, the author makes it clear what hinders the Christian in his or her progress in the Christian life—*sin*. He speaks of sin as a “weight” which “so easily besets us.” The idea is, we become encumbered through sin. It slows us down to an ineffective crawl. Or, in his words, it “easily besets” us. The phrase “which doth so easily beset” is the single Greek term *euperistatos*, which means “standing well around.” The idea is, we are encircled by those in the race with us who are there not to run with us but to work against us, to thwart our every attempt to get to the finish line. The author encourages us to take our example from heaven’s witnesses by running “with patience” the race God has for us.

### Reflection Connection

*Take a few minutes to consider your own race of life. What can you name which remains a hindrance to your race? What is the “weight” which “besets” you?*

Second, the author inspires us by *enabling* us. He writes, “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. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds” (vv. 2-3). Standing at the end of the marathon is Jesus Christ. He is the One Who enables us to compete for the rewards promised.

Therefore, we may successfully run the race of life by *looking* to Jesus. Looking away from all else—especially those things which “easily beset us”—we continue staring at our Lord. No one was ever saved or ever will be without first of all, looking at Jesus (cp. Is. 45:22). In fact, the Christian life not only began with a look, it will most assuredly end with a look (1 John 3:2).

We look at who He is—the *Author*. He successfully ran the race of life, ever keeping His eyes upon the Father of Glory. He starts us off in faith. And, He also is the

*Finisher* as well. Perhaps a better term is “Perfector.” Christ brings us to our goal.

In addition, the author describes Jesus as obtaining joy as He “endured the cross.” What joy? The joy of presenting us as His own eternal trophy to the Heavenly Father! He now sits at God’s right hand as we await with patience His imminent return.

Moreover, we not only *look* to Jesus, we *learn* from Him (v. 3). In other words, we “consider Him.” The term translated “consider” means “to count up.” It carries the idea of meditation. If we face hard times, we consider the stark reality that the Son of God faced them before us. He knows our pain intimately. Hence, we may avoid weariness and faintness by *looking* to Him and *learning* from Him. We are encouraged and enabled by considering Jesus.

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## II. The Obstacles to the Marathon (vv. 4-13)

In reality, the author has already introduced us to the obstacles lying in the path of our spiritual journey when he warned us of the “weight” which “easily besets” us from looking to Jesus. However, he is clear there are other obstacles which threaten the Christian’s progress in his or her spiritual walk with the Lord. He writes, “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. 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: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons." (Heb. 12:4-8). So, what is the obstacle about which the author now informs us? One word—*chastisement*.

First, consider chastisement as a *forgotten truth* (vv. 4-6). The author says, "ye have forgotten the exhortation" (cp. Prov. 3:11-12). Perhaps no other Biblical truth is more neglected than the chastisement from the Lord. Far too many believers today have an attitude reflecting their view of God as a weakened, indulgent Father. The Bible paints a much different picture, however. According to Scripture, God chastises His children when they sin. Note, however, God's chastisement is not meant to be sheer punishment for our sins. Christ has paid our penalty for sin. Rather God chastises us with redemption in mind. While it is correction, it is nonetheless *loving* correction. In fact, chastisement means God is both *interested* in me (v. 5) and *involved* with me (v. 6). The "Lord loveth" those whom He chastens, and those whom He chastens, He "receiveth" as a son (or daughter. How often we forget the chastisement of the Lord.

Second, consider chastisement as a *family truth* (vv. 7-10). He writes, "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons" (v. 7a). Whether or not we realize it, chastisement marks us as the children of God. It proves our inheritance is of the Lord. Hence, our sonship (daughterhood) into the family of God is expressed through chastisement. The author explains the relationship by alluding to "fathers of our flesh" who chasten us (v. 9) because of their loving commitment to us as their own.

Third, consider chastisement as a *fruitful truth*. Note the author's words, "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. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed" (Heb. 12:11-13). In short, we are better because of chastening from the Lord. Why? Chastening prompts us to *grow up* (v. 11) and *go on* (vv. 12-13). While chastening is not pleasant but even painful at the time, "nevertheless afterward," the author insists, the "peaceable fruit of righteousness" becomes the faithful believer's experience. In other words, chastisement "yields" a spiritual harvest to the one who endures it.

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Hence, little wonder exists that the author can coach the runner to "go on," keep running the marathon of life and never give up! We will break a "second wind," so to speak and become strong. Our paths will "make straight"; that is, we will stay in our own lanes as we run the track to the finish line. No obstacle can keep the Christian whose eyes are on Jesus from winning the race set before him.

### Reflection Connection

*How often do you hear about chastisement from the Lord?  
How do you explain our lack of memory for this truth when the Bible is so clear?*



### III. The Outcome of the Marathon (vv. 14-29)

The believer may rest assured that he or she does not run in vain. Our successful outcome is guaranteed from the One Who has already finished the race before us. We were introduced to Him earlier as the “author and finisher of our faith,” the Lord Jesus Himself. For now, however, the author is content to still speak of our race. He writes, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: 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; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. 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.” (Heb. 12:14-17).

Two outcomes are revealed for the faithful marathon runner. First, to the faithful runner is revealed a perfect *clarity of direction*. Since there are hindrances which threaten to hinder the runner from finishing the spiritual marathon, a sure direction is absolutely necessary. Hence, he counsels the runner to “follow” (v. 14). The Greek term translated “follow” carries the idea of a pressing pursuit, a pursuit that will not stop. The pursuit takes the marathon runner following relentlessly after harmony, harmony “with all men.” Our horizontal duty to all other people is to pursue peaceful relationships as much as possible. And, while it is not easy to get along with some people, a faithful runner will follow this clear direction the Lord commands.

In addition, we are also to pursue *holiness*. While our horizontal relationship with other persons demands *harmony*, our vertical relationship with God demands *holiness*. In fact, the author is so convinced that holiness stands as the Christian’s clear direction, that he is able to say, “without [holiness] no man shall see the Lord.” Moral purity is the runner’s clear direction as he or she races through the life’s spiritual marathon.

Clarity is applicable to not only our *direction* in life, but also to the *decisions* we make through life. The author turns to the Old Testament to illustrate the significance of clear decision-making citing the story of Jacob and Esau (vv. 16-17). Two men from the same family, experiencing the same environment, but were totally different characters. Esau’s “profane” character in selling his birthright remains indicative of disregard for the things of God. Every believer must continually keep his or her eyes on Christ for clarity in life’s direction and focus on life’s decisions.

Second, to the faithful runner is revealed a *certainty of destiny* (vv. 18-29). The author contrasts the awesome picture of Moses and the glory revealed to Him when God revealed His law on Sinai (vv. 18-21) to what believers may now

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#### Reflection Connection

*What comes to mind when you think of “holiness”? Do you think there is enough emphasis on “being holy” coming from the church today? Why or why not?*





confidently look toward as their assured destiny—heaven itself. He writes, “But ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, 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, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel” (vv. 22-24). No believer could look back to his or her old life who truly sees the finish line of life! “Mt. Zion” is indicative of God’s *protection*, while the “city of the living God” reflects His eternal *presence*. Our outcome is a kingdom with God as the King. The “heavenly Jerusalem” mirrors the permanence of our guaranteed destiny with God.

Who else will be there? The servants of God—“angels...general assembly”—along with the “sons of God” who, according to the author, is the “church of the first born.” Christ is the “first born” (cp. Rom. 8:17-29), and those who have been born a second time of the Holy Spirit (cp. John 3:3-5) will make up the population of heaven. In short, what makes heaven heaven is the presence of Jesus. And, as an added hallelujah blessing, jubilation will forever take place as we gather with our loved ones who have already gone before us. Christ’s *completed* work on the cross—what the author dubs the “blood of sprinkling”—is the precursor to His *continual* work as “mediator.” Our heavenly destiny lies in Christ and Christ alone.

Finally, because God’s promises are sure (v. 25), the author makes it clear that some things “cannot be shaken.” He writes, “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: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. 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” (Heb. 12 vv. 25-27). Scripture teaches that when God spoke, the world came in being. He spoke and the earth shook. There remains a time when the universe will experience convulsion (v. 26). We have His promise this will take place. The author also reveals His purpose: *sifting out everything without solid foundations* (v. 27).

Nevertheless, for the faithful believer running the marathon of life, we possess a “kingdom which cannot be moved” (v. 28). Our access to the kingdom is through “grace” of course. Indeed it is through grace “we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.” The unhappy alternative for those who fail to enter the race of life is to face a Holy God Who will not hesitate to judge unbelief, “For our God is a consuming fire” (v. 29).

### Golden Greek Nugget

The author opens this chapter stating Jesus not only “endured” the cross but also “endured” contradiction of sinners against Himself (vv. 2-3). Later on, he expects believers to also “endure” when God issues loving chastisement to them (v. 7). The Greek word in all three references is *hypomenō*, which comes from two other words meaning “under” and “to remain.” The idea is to remain in place no matter what pressure or temptation to abandon one’s position comes one’s way. It is the term of rugged durability, a basic “staying power” when things get really tough.

### Wrap Up

*In this study, the author’s focus has been to inspire believers to run the race of life. The race we are called to enter is not a sprint but a marathon. There is no looking back or turning back. We must keep our eyes squarely on Jesus Who remains the “author” and “finisher” of our faith. He awaits us at the end of the course with arms wide open. We are further inspired to run knowing we have a massive “cloud of witnesses” in the heavenly stadium cheering us on, guiding us and prodding us every step we take.*

