



Central Peninsula Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

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Hebrews 12:1-13
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The Race

SERIES: *Hebrews: Jesus for Beat-Up People*

Growing up my greatest fear was public speaking. I couldn't stand speaking in front of people. My face would get beet red, I'd begin to sweat and I'd draw a blank! As the years went by I felt the call of God to become a pastor. And I thought, if I'm going to be a pastor, I'd better learn how to do public speaking.

My pastor in Santa Barbara was Reed Jolley. One day before I was going to preach, Reed and I went for a walk. He said, "What's your sermon about today?" After a ten minute explanation, he looked at me and said, "Say it in a sentence. Until you can say it in a sentence, you're not ready to preach."

Well, if you were in Santa Barbara on a walk with Reed Jolley and the two of you were talking, not about your sermon but about life—talking, going on and on about the meaning and purpose of life—and Reed asked you to "say it in a sentence," what would you say? If you had to say it in a sentence, what is this life and how do we live it?

What's your theory of life? We all have one, most of us just haven't been forced to articulate it in a single sentence. Forrest Gump had a sentence. What was his sentence? "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get." What's your sentence?

This is the final sermon in a series on the book of Hebrews, a series we've been calling *Jesus for Beat-Up People*. And we've been calling it that because the book of Hebrews was written to 1st century urban people who, like many of us here, were beat-up by life, tired, and losing focus in their Christian lives. The people that Hebrews was written to were disoriented by the unexpected difficulties that had come into their life.

These people had a theory of life. They had a sentence of sorts that made sense of life and how to live it, but the unexpected difficulties that had come their way (the disappointments, the suffering, the persecution) had shattered their theory of life. They were left feeling confused and discouraged and uncertain of how to factor all of these difficulties into their understanding of God and their understanding of what they thought was a life lived for God.

The point of this whole book has been encouragement—to keep these people going, to give these people a vision of life that would keep them from giving up. And in today's passage we come to the climax of the book, the climax of the encouragement. We're not given a *single* sentence, but in just a few sentences, in a mere 13 verses, the author of Hebrews gives these 1st century Christians and he give us, a theory of life.

In a sense, this passage takes everything Hebrews has been saying in 13 chapters and says it in 13 verses. This passage takes a biblical theory of life, the wardrobe of this whole book, and packs it into a little suitcase of 13 verses.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.' It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, 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" (Hebrews 12:1-13).

What these 13 verses tell us is that life is a race. These verses tell us what this race is, who's in charge of this race, and how to run this race. What. Who. How.

1. The Race: What it is.

First, what this race is. "Life is a race." What does that mean? Why does the author of Hebrews liken life to a race? Well, the word that's translated "race" in verse 1 is the Greek word *agona*. Do you hear a familiar English word there? Listen again, *agona*. This is where we get our word "agony" from. What this text is saying—try this for a Christian bumper sticker—is that life is agonizing. Life is full of difficulty and agony.

This word *agona* can refer to more than a race. This word was used in the 1st century to refer to "a contest." It was used most commonly to refer to the series of contests that took place in the ancient Olympic Games.

It's Olympic season right now. The games start in a few weeks. And it's shaping up to be a great Olympics. We've got two big stories so far. There's the controversy over the new swimsuits. And the other story: every middle-aged woman in America now has their hero in Dara Torres, the 41-year-old swimmer who's beating the socks off the younger swimmers half her age.

That's the big scoop on the 29th Summer Olympic Games. But the ancient Olympic Games began in Olympia, Greece in 776 B.C. And in the 1st century, when Hebrews was written, the main event of the Olympic Games was the pentathlon. This five-part contest involved running, jumping, discus, javelin, and boxing.

Actually, in verse 4 the author talks about how these Christians had not yet struggled to the point of "**shedding blood.**" This is probably a reference to how the persecution these people were facing hadn't yet gotten to a point of bloodshed. But, a few of the commentators I was reading this week think this is also a reference to the boxing event in the pentathlon. In this event you wrapped leather around your fists which would protect your hands, but would cut your opponent's face and make him bleed. So our author might also be talking about boxing, not only running in this passage.

The boxing was bloody in the ancient pentathlon, but the most popular and most grueling contest was the foot race. Now this wasn't a sprint, this wasn't a 100 yard dash, this was an endurance race. The word "endurance" shows up four times in our passage. For this kind of race you needed endurance, you needed stamina, not speed. Typically this was about a 3-mile race. Depending on the size of the stadium, you ran anywhere between 18 to 24 laps around a sand track.

If you've ever run a 3 mile race you know the level of difficulty and endurance it involves. When I ran track, I used to compete in the half-mile, the mile, and the 2-mile race. The 2-mile race required a level of endurance and involved an exhaustion and temptation to give up that was radically different from the shorter races. When I ran the 2-mile, I had to adjust my expectations as to what that race was going to feel like.

Every athlete that ran this ancient Olympic race went into the race *expecting* that it would be difficult, that there would be moments in the race where they felt like giving up, that at times the race would be agonizing.

This is what the author of Hebrews wants to tell us about life. He wants *us* to adjust our expectations, to reevaluate our theory of life and recognize that life is a race—it's difficult, it's oftentimes agonizing, and it requires endurance.

George MacDonald once wrote, "Everything difficult points to something more than our theory of life yet embraces." Did you get that? "Everything difficult points to something more than our theory of life yet embraces." We all go through life with a theory of life, with a theory of how life is supposed to work. Then, something difficult happens that clashes with your theory of life, that clashes with your expectations of how things are supposed to go, and you're forced to reevaluate your theory of life in light of this difficulty, in light of your unmet expectations.

Most of your troubles in life have to do with your expectations. You expected life to go like this...you expected things to turn out like this...but they didn't and that's hard.

Has your life turned out the way you expected it to turn out? Does your theory of life embrace the reality of difficulty?

For most Americans, our theory of life is comfort. We're pursuing, we're expecting a comfortable life. We don't know how to deal with difficulty, suffering, and pain. We have an anesthetic, a pain killer, an escape for everything difficult. We have people who write best selling books called *Your Best Life Now*, when the Bible tells us that we're living for our best life *later*.

This Wednesday, driving home from work, I sat in traffic behind a car with license plate frame that "said it in a sentence" It said, "Life is a glass of cabernet." Well, if you're expecting life to always taste like a smooth glass of red wine, you're going to have a hard time. You're going to need to change your license plate frame when seasons of life come your way that taste more like vinegar.

What the opening verses of this passage call us to do is to adjust our expectations. What life is, it's a race. It's a good race, it's an exciting race, it's a worthwhile race, but it's also a difficult race. *Agona*. This race, this life, the sooner we adjust our expectations and embrace the reality that life is going to involve difficulty and it's going to require endurance, the sooner we swallow *that* glass of wine, the better.

We can take courage from the fact that other people have gone before us and run this same race. Verse 1 says that in this race we're surrounded by a great "**cloud of witnesses.**" This word "cloud" means crowd. These ancient races took place in stadiums where the stands were crowded with people. The stadium in Olympia Greece could hold 40,000 spectators.

And the idea is that there's a crowd of people—all the people that the author of Hebrews mentioned in chapter 11, and for us reading this 2,000 years later, the whole long line of Christians that

have lived before us—all these people have also run a difficult race and they finished and now they're in the stands cheering us on.

Do you remember how it felt in high school when as you approached the track or you approached the field, whatever your sport was, and you looked into the stands and saw friends and family members cheering you on? Seeing the crowd in the stands gave you tremendous motivation to get out there and run hard, play hard.

That's certainly part of the idea here, that we have a crowd of former runners cheering us on. But the main idea isn't what the crowd sees in us, it's what we see in them. As we run this race that at times feels very difficult, the Bible's telling us to have a mental image of being in a stadium, surrounded by and looking to a crowd of people who've been through what we've been through. And by looking to them we can find fresh comfort and fresh courage for our race.

2. The Race: Who's in Charge.

The second thing we discover in this text is who's in charge of this race. And this is really good news. Some of this teaching is going to sound hard at first, but if we really listen to what the Bible says here, it's good news and it has the power, especially if you're suffering right now, to really help you.

When it comes to experiencing difficulty in our lives, I think many of us have a wrong, really a discouraging, understanding of how God relates to us in that. And so what this passage is is cut and paste. This passage cuts out of our heads, cuts out of our theory of life, a wrong view of God, and pastes into our minds a true and beautiful view of God and the relationship we have with him.

Today's passage begins and ends with this metaphor of a race: life is a race. But in verse 5 and on through the middle of this passage the metaphor shifts from the racetrack to the family. I think that's because when we're suffering we don't want to think of God as our coach instructing us on the racetrack. We need to know that God is our Father, that he loves us.

This passage tells us that as we run the race of life, we have a Father who's deeply involved in the race, a Father who disciplines us throughout the race of life. And here's what you've got to hear from me before we dive into all of this—if you're a Christian, if you've repented of your sin and placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, your Heavenly Father disciplines you in life, but he never punishes you. When this passage talks about discipline, it's not talking about punishment, it's not talking about payback. All the punishment, all the payback that you ever deserved for your sins was dealt with 2,000 years ago on the cross. God the Father punished Jesus in your place so that he would never need to punish you.

If you're a Christian, God does not punish you. Do you hear me? God does not punish you because Jesus took your punishment. But, God does discipline us. The problem

here is that our English word "discipline" is so similar to the word punishment, it's so similar to "tit for tat" payback. I tell my son not to swim in the toilet, he disobeys, I discipline him. No. What this passage means by "discipline" is different.

The word "discipline" that's used here nine times in these 13 verses is the Greek word *paideia*. In the 1st century world it was a father's responsibility to shape and train his son, to produce character in his son, to educate and raise his son in such a way that his son was equipped with the qualities and character traits necessary to be a good man and live a good life.

Paideia was the intentional, loving, involved discipline that 1st century fathers gave to their children, especially to their sons. So, as we talk about "discipline," don't think about our English word discipline, think about *paideia*. It's from this word *paideia* that we get our English word "pediatrician." A pediatrician is a doctor whose job is devoted to the well-being and care of children. From time to time a pediatrician must offer treatment that's temporarily uncomfortable for a child, yet such treatment, such discipline, always has the child's best interest in mind.

In the 1st century world, if you didn't receive *paideia*, if your father didn't discipline you, it was a sign that your father didn't love you, that he'd abandoned you. Verses 7 and 8, **"For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline...then you are illegitimate children and not sons."**

Have you ever spent time with a child, or with an adult, who didn't receive discipline from their parents? They're messed up! Deep down a child knows that a parent's discipline is a sign of a parent's love.

If I didn't discipline my son, I'd be a bad father, an unloving father. If I'm not involved in my son's life to such a degree that I lead him through moments and seasons of life that are difficult for him, that are uncomfortable for him, that involve a degree of suffering for him, that conflict with his wants and expectations—if I don't lead my son through such *paideia*, then it's a *sign* that I don't truly love my son and it's a *guarantee* that my son will have a very difficult time navigating life.

Almost universally all the religions of the world regard difficulty in life, suffering, as a mark of disfavor from god, as punishment for sins and mess-ups. Not Christianity. This passage tells us that suffering and difficulty are very often marks of our Heavenly Father's love and involvement in our life.

If you're a Christian, you have a Father. And what you have is a loving Father. Even though sometimes you can't see it, even though sometimes it doesn't feel like it, your Father never deals with you in anger, he never deals with you to punish you. Your Father deals with you and disciplines you only out of

love. Love! If you think God deals with you out of anger, you don't understand what took place at the cross.

You've got to believe what verse 10 says, **"he disciplines us for our good."** Do you believe that your Father wants your good? Your Father is more about your good than you are. You've got to believe that your Father knows you and knows your life better than you do and he's far more committed to your good than you are.

Your Father won't allow an inch more or an inch less of what you need for your good. He's putting you through what he's putting you through to make you stronger, even though you might feel like you're getting weaker rather than stronger.

When you exercise you feel like you're getting weaker, but you're really getting stronger. Remember the pushups from last week? When you do pushups you feel like you're getting weaker, but you're really getting stronger. A muscle has to be opposed, taxed, weakened in order to be made stronger. When you're doing pushups and your chest and arms start to hurt, you've got to keep going because that makes you stronger. We don't grow stronger unless our Father takes us through discipline that, at the time, makes us feel weak.

Have you noticed that suffering brings out the worst in you? When you suffer, you find out what you're really made of. When I suffer, I find out that I'm not nearly as impressive as I thought I was. All my junk, all my brokenness, rises to the surface. It's like taking a bath. You don't know how dirty you are until you take a bath and the water changes colors.

When you're sitting in the middle of your dirty water, it's not fun. That's what verse 11 says, **"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant."** In the moment, right now, the discipline you're experiencing from the hand of your loving Father "seems" (this word "seems" is a big word), painful. And, well, it is painful, but right now it "seems" like pain and dirty water is all there is to it.

But look at the second half of verse 11, **"but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."** Later, once you get some distance and time from the discipline, you'll see that what was painful has brought you peace. What made you feel weak has made you stronger, better. What you thought was just a tub of dirty water, has made you clean.

We've all got our stories like this, a season of discipline and suffering that we went through in the past that when we were in the middle of it we just wanted it to stop. But looking back we now see that our Father knew exactly what he was doing—he was giving us the loving *paideia* that we desperately needed, but didn't know we needed.

At the center of your theory of life you must decide whether or not you believe that you have a Father who loves you, who disciplines you as an expression of his love, and who you can trust with all your heart.

Tom Landry, the great football coach, once said, "The job of a coach is to make men do what they don't want

to do, in order to be what they've always wanted to be." The job of our Father is to give us discipline that we don't necessarily want or understand, in order that we can be the kind of people that deep down we really want to be.

3. The Race: How to run it.

We've been told who's in charge of this race, now, the final thing this passage teaches us is how to run this race. It tells us to do three things: trust, strip, stare. To run the race of life we've got to trust, strip, and stare.

First, we've got to trust. This is what I've already been talking about. You've got to trust, you've got to really trust, that your Father loves you and he knows exactly what he's doing with your life. Unless you trust him, unless you have assurance that you're God's son, you're God's daughter, you're going to be constantly tripped up by doubts and fears and questions and anxiety, and you're going to make this race a lot harder than it needs to be.

Verse 2 says that we're running with endurance the race that is **"set before us."** You've got to trust that your Father has set before you the specific race that he wanted you to have. God created you to run your race. He's set before you a different race than he's set before me.

We all have a different race set before us. And what we need to stop doing is comparing our race to other people's. We need to quit wishing that we had somebody else's race. You'd get rid of a lot of your problems and a lot of your unhappiness if you quit thinking that somebody else's race is better than yours and how your life would be so much better if it was just more like this person's.

God made you. God loves you. And he set before you the race that you need to run. So, trust God. Relax and run your race.

Have you ever noticed that the best runners are the most relaxed runners? Watch the Olympics in a few weeks. The athletes that run the best, that get the best times, they run relaxed. They run hard, they sweat, parts of the race are really difficult, but throughout the whole race they're relaxed.

Run relaxed. Run your race hard, run it well, but run relaxed. You can trust God that he has set before you the race that he created you to run.

Now, the second thing you've got to do, strip. First century athletes stripped for their races. In their training these athletes stripped themselves of excess body fat and on race day they stripped themselves of just about all their clothing. They stripped themselves of any excess weight or distraction that would get in the way of running a good race. This is the image behind verse 1, **"let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely."**

This verse tells us to strip our lives of weight and sin that hinders and distracts us from running the

race that God has set before us. What do you need to strip yourself of? Evaluate your life through the grid of Hebrews 12:1. Take a look at your life and examine what needs to go. Some of what needs to go is sin and some of what needs to go isn't necessarily sin, it's just excess weight that's begun to slow you down.

So, strip. Carve out a little time this week to think about your life in light of this verse and ask God to reveal what he wants you to strip yourself of.

The third and final thing we have to do to run this race is stare. In high school my track coach taught us to always look straight ahead, down the track, when we ran. In a race, where you look makes all the difference. Have you ever tried to run forward while looking sideways?

In 1st century stadiums, during these races, oftentimes you had a person of honor seated on a platform at the center of the racetrack near the finish line. And these athletes looked straight ahead at this honored guest as they ran their race. What verses 2 and 3 tell us to do is to, as we run the race of life, look straight ahead and stare at Jesus who's seated on a throne at the finish line.

Notice the incredible logic of verse 3. Notice the remedy for weariness, "**Consider Jesus...so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.**" Are you feeling weary, are you feeling fainthearted in your race? Verse 3 prescribes your remedy, "consider Jesus." Look to Jesus. Stare at Jesus.

If you stare at the sun you'll burn your eyes. But if you stare at the Son of God you'll recover from weariness and faintheartedness. This is what you should see when you look at Jesus. You should see a track star, a tree, and a throne.

Jesus is a track star, he's run this race better than anyone else. He's got the best time. He set the record and nobody will ever break it. What Jesus had set before him was the most agonizing race of all and he ran it perfectly. In your race, you'll never have to face anything like what Jesus had to face.

Next, when you stare at Jesus you should see a tree. The Roman statesman Cicero who was born about 40 years before Jesus, called the Roman cross "the tree of shame." Being crucified on a Roman cross was the most shameful of deaths. And verse 2 tells that though we only have to endure a race, *Jesus* endured the cross—he endured the tree of shame, verse 2, "**despising the shame.**"

Jesus redefined the tree of shame into a tree of beauty. On the cross Jesus didn't receive discipline, he didn't receive *paideia* from his Father; he received punishment. He received the punishment that we deserve for our sins so that we could receive a Father who now deals with us only in love, who gives us *paideia* but never punishment.

The third thing you should see when you look down that racetrack is a throne. Verse 2 says we see Jesus on his throne "**seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**" The throne not only represents that Jesus has finished the work of saving us from our sins and has sat down because the work is done; the throne also represents Jesus' rule over your life, over my life, and over the Universe. When your race gets difficult, when things feel like they're falling apart, when you grow weary, stare at Jesus because Jesus is still on that throne. He's still in control. Your life might be hard, but Jesus is still on his throne. Stare at him!

And there's something else you should see. This is incredible. Verse 2 says that it was "**for the joy**" that was set before him that Jesus endured the cross. I spent all week thinking about this and studying this. What is this joy that was set before Jesus? What is this joy that motivated Jesus to enter our race and suffer on the tree of shame?

Jesus already had joy. Jesus has always existed as the second person of the Trinity, he's always enjoyed perfect relationship and community with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus has always had unspeakable joy in the Trinity. Jesus has always had the joy of being at the right hand of the throne of God.

So what is this joy that was set before Jesus? Us! You! You are the joy that was set before Jesus. What Jesus didn't have was you, a relationship with you, the joy of saving you and knowing you.

Charles Spurgeon said, "What was 'the joy that was set before him'? Oh, it's a thought that melts a rock. It makes the heart of iron move. The joy set before Jesus was principally joy of saving you and me!"

You and me! We don't deserve it, but we are that dear to our Father, we are a joy to Jesus. For the joy that was set before him, for you and me, Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Can you say it in a sentence?

Life is a race with a loving Father and with a Savior who considers us his joy.