

**Run to Win!**  
Hebrews 12:1-13  
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When I was 13 a new kid joined our school named Andrew. And I can still remember the first time I saw him. It was day 1 of grade 8 and Andrew was jogging across the field towards the door where I was huddled with my classmates.

And immediately I was in awe. Andrew was everything I wasn't. He looked confident and why not? He was tall with broad shoulders and a great physique – in grade 8! In contrast, with the exception of one girl, I was the shortest kid in class. And not only that, I was so scrawny that when the bullies found some little guy to pick on that little guy would stick me in a locker to recover.

Well, it turned out Andrew and I became friends and so I got invited to his house. And I found something strange there – Andrew had a small weight gym in his bedroom – Andrew worked out.

And so on occasion – life once every couple of months – we would lift weights together. But I never saw any results and so, very logically, I concluded that Andrew's physique had nothing to do with his weightlifting and everything to do with his genetics.

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Good morning. If you are new with us, we are in the last week of our summer preaching schedule before our big kick off next week. And in the fall, we are going to be spending our time in Hebrews 11 and a series I'm calling "Faith it till you make it."

Hebrews 11, if you don't know, contains a big list of Bible characters mistakenly called "heroes of the faith." Think guys like Abraham, Noah and Moses. Amazing stories for sure. But the stories are amazing, not because any of these guys are heroes. A hero is someone who does something awesome to save people who can't save themselves – none of these people are that. Rather God amazingly saves and uses these people in spite of themselves.

The only thing any of these people do is trust that they aren't amazing. And that's what faith is. Faith is the assurance that God will bring us into what He has for us in spite of ourselves.

Well, we are going to get into all that soon, but today let's go to Hebrews 12 as a kind of preview. Would you stand with me as we come before God's word? Hebrews 12 verse 1. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Hebrews 12:1-13]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Hebrews is about how to have abundant life in spite of suffering. It's the Bible's answer to the problem of evil – “If God exists how come we suffer?” And this is particularly relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century North Americans because we experience suffering incredibly quickly. I mean when we encounter the smallest offence or inconvenience, we cry out about the injustice of it all faster than any other culture has ever done – probably this ticks you off and you want to object.

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Now there are all sorts of reasons for this, but one of the most significant is our embrace of secularism. You see every religion addresses the meaning of suffering and how to deal with it, but secularism has both no answer for pain and sees no value in it.

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Now in case you're really not offended yet, you need to know that if you've spent any time in Canada then you've drunk this Kool-Aid. Here's the test: think about what your actions show you value. Ask yourself “how much effort do I put towards increasing my comfort and pleasure? What do I spend my money on? What do I do with my free time? What do my most important relationships center around? If what you want is at the center of those questions, then secularism has its claws in you.

You see a secularist is someone who believes that this is all there is – there is nothing to come and no one in charge – and therefore the most important thing we can do is spend our time pursuing our greatest comfort and ease right now.

And this is what it means to be Canadian. This is what we do. And this is why Canadians have some of the lowest pain tolerance of any people on earth. It's because there is no room for suffering in our worldview. Suffering is the opposite of everything we are pursuing.

And so when we do suffer – and everyone does – then the first thing we do is medicate – think Tylenol, TV and tequila. And some people go to socially acceptable meds, and some go to socially unacceptable ones, but Canadians are good at medicating pain. And finally when life can't be lived without pain even with the meds we conclude it should be lived at all and medical assistance in dying is trumpeted as the final escape.

And yet even with all our pain-escaping options people still suffer. Loneliness is an epidemic. Depression levels are higher than ever before. People are suffering and secular society has no answer. There has never been a culture with fewer resources for dealing with the brutal realities of life and death.

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But Hebrews says there is another option. Actually, abundant life – not just survival, but joy – is available to everyone, even in the face of pain, through Jesus. And the brilliant thing about Hebrews is that it doesn't just give us theological ideas, it tells us how to get there. And this is where we are going today. So here's our outline if you're tired of medicating and want to really live. First, we are going to see that life is a race, then we are going to look at why we need to run this race, and finally how to do it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller

First, life is a race. So Hebrews actually gives two illustrations in our text today, and a race is the first one. Verse 1 says:

Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.  
(Hebrews 12:1)

Life is a race. Now I have always been fast and so that sounds fun. But “race” here comes from the Greek word “agon” from which we get our word “agony” so fun is not the point. Rather life is a marathon; it’s an agonizing struggle. Another way to translate this is “life is a fight.” And verse 4 alludes to this when it says:

After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin. (Hebrews 12:4)

The NIV says “you have not yet shed blood” but the reference is the same; it’s to the games in Rome. Now recent archeology has proved that most gladiator games didn’t end in death like Hollywood depicts, but they were still brutal.<sup>2</sup> Rome loved blood.

And so in the games there were a couple different kinds of “contestants” – if you can call them that. There was the “cannon fodder” – criminals or slaves who weren’t worth much. These were the extras in the show who often lost their limbs or lives. But as you can imagine they would fight as hard as they could. And this meant the main characters, the athletes, had to train in order to avoid the same fate.

And without endorsing the games Hebrews 12 picks up this training picture. It says:

No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it’s painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.  
(Hebrews 12:11)

So life is a marathon, it’s a fight where suffering is inevitable. You’re going to bleed, eventually you’re going to die. You will suffer. And so, because life is a fight, you need to train for it. And the word train here is “*gymnazio*” which probably sounds familiar, and we will get to in a second, but first we need to see that there’s a purpose to the pain. You see the inevitability of suffering isn’t pessimism, it’s part of a plan. Look at verse 1:

Let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. (Hebrews 12:1)

The race – the fight, the *agon* that has been set before you – is from God.

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Now, I need to pause and talk to anyone here who is in the middle of suffering right now. Because this verse by itself probably will not help you. But the Bible actually has two messages about suffering. They are like two sides of the same coin. And we need them both at different times.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.thoughtco.com/how-did-gladiator-fights-end-118422#:~:text=Gladiatorial%20contests%20were%20dangerous%20and%20potentially%20fatal%2C%20but,so%20most%20battles%20did%20not%20end%20in%20death>. (Accessed August 31, 2024)

So if you are suffering right now, the side you need is to know that God hates suffering and evil. And God didn't create evil, it entered His perfect garden when we rebelled against Him. And God has gone to infinite lengths to set in motion a plan to bring humanity back to the paradise He created us to enjoy in the beginning.

And that will happen one day, but in the meantime suffering and death endure as enemies who stand in rebellion against what God is working out. And we get a glimpse of this as Jesus stands before His friend Lazarus' tomb.

And in that moment Jesus doesn't say "Meh! Death and suffering is no big deal. All things work together for good for those who love God" – Jesus doesn't say that. Instead John tells us:

When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within Him, and He was deeply troubled. (John 11:33)

If you're suffering you need to know that Jesus suffers with the people He loves. And Jesus hates suffering and death. It makes Him angry and miserable. This is not the way He created the world to work. This is not what He wants for you. And it breaks His heart that you are going through what you are.

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If you're suffering you need to see that Jesus loves you and wants to meet you in your need.

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But this is not the only message the Bible gives about suffering. And Hebrews gives us the other side. And that is that God is so big that even though death and evil are His enemies, when they act in rebellion against Him He is able to use the worst they can throw at us to train us to live the abundant life He created us for. And here's where we come to the *gymnazio* of verse 11.

You see none of us have arrived in life yet. Jesus has not said to me or anyone: "Yup Dan, you've made it. You are living in everything I've got for you. Just relax now and coast."

If you're following that voice you're not following Jesus. Everyone needs to grow to be more Christlike. And God wants this for us because it is as we look like Jesus that we win at life both now and forever.

But this second side of the coin requires the *gymnazio*. Hebrews says, God has put a race in front of you, and if you are going to run it then you need to train. And suffering is the gym we train at.

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So three quick things about training - working out. First, every doctor will tell you that you won't live a long and healthy life unless you are willing to groan and sweat a bit. You will not be able to keep doing what you used to do unless you exert yourself from time to time. And we call this exertion exercise.

So what is exercise? What is a treadmill? What is a bench press? It's something that makes your muscles do what they don't want to do. See your muscles want to relax; they want to eat ice cream and watch TV. However, if this is all you do then you will get flabby and die. I hope this isn't surprising to anyone. But if you make your muscles do something they don't want to do then you will get stronger and healthier. If you want to live you need to train.

But the second thing about training is that when you are doing it you feel like you are getting weaker not stronger. Like when you lie on the bench and press one rep is easy so you do another and another. "Light weight baby." But then all of a sudden the weight starts getting heavy. And you do a couple more and then there is a wall where the weight goes down but it doesn't go back up. And that's when you make eye contact with your spotter and hope he likes you. "Save me!"

Or when you run, you start strong but soon you start getting tired. Training makes you feel like you are getting weaker, but you are actually getting stronger.

Here's the third thing about working out – it's not training if you do it once – that's wishful thinking. But so many people think, "Oh I tried that, and it doesn't work for me" when actually training works for everyone. For years I thought Andrew was a genetic freak, until I started getting up every morning and going to the gym. Now we look the same – except I'm still short.

Here's the point: training is essential. Your Christlikeness isn't going to grow unless it's tested. Your commitment will never grow unless it's threatened. Your patience will never grow unless it's taxed. Your compassion will never grow unless it's tapped. Your courage will never grow unless it's challenged.<sup>3</sup> The way to win at life is to look like Jesus and it is impossible to look more like the Suffering Servant without suffering.

And so Hebrews challenges, look at what you are going through from this perspective. God has put this race in front of you because He wants you to win – He wants you to look like Jesus. So life is a race, train for it.

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But this brings us to the second point which is why run? Why not walk? Why not just try to get through it? Why run? And we get the answer to this in verse 5 and following where the author drops the race language to talk about relationship. It says:

"My child, don't make light of the Lord's discipline,  
and don't give up when He corrects you.  
For the Lord disciplines those He loves,  
and He punishes each one He accepts as His child." (Hebrews 12:5-6)

So all of a sudden we are talking about parenting, but the picture is still hard. Nobody wants to bleed in the gladiator arena, but really nobody wants to lose their screen time – right kids?

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Tim Keller

Now for some people here the idea of discipline causes anxiety because you were abused, and Hebrews isn't endorsing that. Abuse happens when a child makes the parent angry, and the parent uses their superior strength or wit to get the child back. That's not punishment; that's abuse. But loving parents know that their children need to be trained. And training is motivated by love, not revenge. Solomon says:

Train up a child in the way he should go,  
And when he is old he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6 NKJV)

And this is the discipline Hebrews is talking about. God actually uses suffering to train up the children He loves so we can really live.

And this makes sense right? Like when my kids lie to me I can't let them just get away with it. If I do they will think that lying is how to get ahead, and they will grow up to be liars. But liars don't win at life. People don't trust liars, and liars don't trust anyone else. That's poverty not life, and I don't want that for my kids. So when they lie, I need to discipline them. I need to train them to be truthful.

Now I don't know about your kids, but mine are not fans of discipline. They complain wildly like they are being murdered if I take away their screen time. And I don't enjoy making my kids miserable. But because I love them I have to find ways to train them so that as they grow they leave behind their childish ways and mature into productive members of society. Loving parents do what they don't enjoy for the good of their kids.

And Hebrews says God is a perfectly loving Father. He never loses His temper. He never responds in anger. He always does what is best for us. And He knows that what is best for us is to develop in Christlikeness. And the challenge is to embrace this.

So, if you lose your temper at the smallest inconvenience then pray for patience and embrace what God brings into your life knowing He loves you. And if you are proud and superior to the idiots around you then pray for humility and embrace what God brings into your life knowing that He loves you. If you want to win at life run the race, don't walk, because you know it is your Father who loves you who has set it before you.

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But, how? How can we possibly live like this? How can we view our suffering as something God is using to bring us to the very place that He knows is best? In conclusion: two practical action points and then the power.

First, train yourself to be humble. Perhaps the biggest complaint atheists raise against God is, if there is a God how come there is all this suffering? And this question usually comes from experience. When we hurt, we look for a reason why.

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Unfortunately the Bible never promises God will make our suffering make sense – His ways are always above ours. But Hebrews does give us a path out of this impossible question. It says, "you need to understand that you're the child in this relationship."

Now let's face it, no child ever looks at their parent who is taking away their Nintendo and says "You're right dad, this is exactly what I need." No! They all think the punishment is unfair and unbearable. And they cry and complain about it. And that's because they're kids. It's going to be at least 20 years before they say "Thanks."

And Hebrews says this is what we have to understand about suffering. God probably isn't going to tell you why you lost your job or why your loved one died, but we need to be humble about this because we can't understand. So pray, "Father, use what I'm going through to make me into what You want me to be." Train yourself to be humble.

Second, train yourself to obey in spite of the suffering. Verse 1 says:

Strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And... run with endurance the race God has set before us. (Hebrews 12:1)

So often when I suffer I respond by pulling back from what is right. I retreat from my Bible reading. I drink more. I watch more TV. I think "I deserve to be self-indulgent because I've experienced this hard thing." Does anyone else do that? Just me?

But it's a lie from Satan to think I deserve to sin. And Satan he hates you. So don't give up when you suffer; run. It's by following Jesus that we win at life.

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And of course this is the power. Jesus has the power we need to actually do what He commands. Hebrews says:

Run... the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting Him, He endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now He is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility He endured... then you won't become weary and give up. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Set your eyes on Jesus. He's your champion. He's the hero who helps those who can't help themselves. And He accomplished this by putting on your shoes and walking in your place. He knows what you are experiencing because He is the Suffering Servant.

And it's as we cling to Jesus that we can endure any suffering. You see Jesus suffered the ultimate pain. At the cross He suffered your death so you can live. He experienced the ultimate agony – separation from the Father – so you can be brought home.

And Jesus suffered all this for the joy awaiting Him – the joy of having the relationship with you He created you for. And He did all this so that when you suffer you can grow to become what He created you to be – a child of God; an image bearer of His Father. This is the abundant life He has for you; it's life that starts now and lasts forever. So fix your eyes on Jesus and run!

Works Consulted:

Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-runner/>

[www.ThoughtCo.com](http://www.ThoughtCo.com) – Gladiator combat

N.T. Write "Hebrews for Everyone"