

“The Founder and Perfecter of Our Faith”

Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:1-17 (text)

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Congregation of Christ: In 203 A.D., about a century after John the last apostle died, there was a young Christian woman who was in prison awaiting her execution for being a Christian. When her pagan father visited her in prison, he tried to persuade her to renounce her faith in Christ. According to some accounts, there was this conversation:

"Father do you see this vase here? Could it be called by any other name than what it is?"

"No," the father said answered.

"Well, neither can I be called anything other than what I am, a Christian," she replied.

This young Christian woman was Perpetua, who lived in Carthage (in present-day Tunisia), and belonged to a noble family. She was married and had recently given birth to a son. At that time, the Roman emperor persecuted Christians in North Africa. Perpetua and four of her friends were new Christians when they were arrested. Because she refused to deny her Savior, she and her friends were sentenced to die in a public arena to be mauled to death by wild beasts. Just before the animals mauled her to death, she exhorted Christians in the crowd, "Stand fast in the faith."

Although our loved ones were not martyred for their faith, they too are our "heroes of the faith," persevering through all kinds of sufferings and trials in this world. They too counted themselves as merely pilgrims and strangers in this world, but now reside in their homeland—a better city and country. And these include our mothers.

These loved ones and friends, together with the Old Testament "heroes of the faith," are our examples in our own pilgrimage in this world. Our text says that they are "*a great cloud of witnesses*" surrounding us. These witnesses are our examples in running and finishing the race of life. The Apostle Paul likewise declares near the end of his own race, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*" (2 Tim 4:7).

This race that all believers run include many obstacles—just like running a 3,000-meter steeplechase with 28 barriers or hurdles and 7 water jumps. Our obstacles are temptations, sufferings, afflictions, and persecution. Our text says that at times, these hurdles are part of God's discipline of his children. And this discipline "*strengthens our feeble arms and weak knees.*"

Let Us Run with Endurance

No athlete goes into competition without preparation. Sometimes, the preparation begins when the athlete is at a very young age. Two things are very important in the preparation: (1) using light and small equipment, and (2) disciplined training and repetitive practice.

First, the author says, “Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.” In all foot races, whether sprints or long-distance, runners today wear as little and as light as they can. Research continues to produce lighter and lighter shirts, shorts and shoes for athletes. Why the obsession with light and small equipment? Because the lighter weight an athlete carries, the faster he performs for a longer time. Speed combined with endurance is the name of the game. All world-class runners are lean but in the best shape.

In like manner, the Hebrews writer exhorts all believers to shed all excess weight, which he uses as a metaphor for sin. Sin hinders, burdens and weighs down our spiritual growth in our lives. What are some of these sins? John says they are the love of the world and its lusts, desires and possessions (1 John 2:14-16). We have ambitions, families, hobbies and sports that hinder our focus on Christ and his Word on the Lord’s Day and on our daily walk with God. We harbor envy, jealousy, anger, malice and hate against our Christian brethren. These are obstacles along the way in our pilgrimage to heaven itself, sins that weigh our lives down that are to be removed and laid aside.

We read examples of Old Testament saints who laid aside sin and self in Hebrews 11. Abraham laid aside his family, home, and prosperity in the Ur of the Chaldees to live in tents in the Promised Land as a sojourner (Heb 11:8-10). Moses laid aside his privileged and honored status as a prince of Egypt for the sake of Christ (Heb 11:25-26). Prophets forsook the comforts of their homes, going about *“in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated... wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth”* (Heb 11:37-38).

Think of all the persecuted Christians throughout the world today, how they refuse to deny Christ even if their homes and lives are threatened. Like the Biblical heroes of the faith, they laid aside all the worldly comforts and sins for the sake of Christ.

Second, running the race of the Christian life involves disciplined training and repetitive practice. Paul also uses the race metaphor often, saying, *“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things... But I discipline my body and keep it under control”* (1 Cor 9:25-27). Just as an athlete goes through painful physical training, so Paul endures physical, financial and emotional hardship to preach the gospel to all nations. Repetition makes the athletic performance routine and second nature to the athlete. A player knows instinctively how to respond to his opponent’s moves because he has rehearsed and played the game over and over before the actual competition.

Likewise, how do you, as a Christian, discipline and train yourself to endure the race of life? If you practice Christian *discipline* it means you are a *disciple* of Christ. Jesus himself tells us one way to train in discipline, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples”* (John 8:31). How would you abide in the words of Christ if not other than regular daily reading and hearing of Scriptures every Lord’s Day, at the same time studying, memorizing and meditating on them?

Another Christian discipline that trains you is praying without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17), praying persistently so as not to lose heart and give up the race (Luke 18:1). Paul knows that

prayer is the Christian's most powerful resource in the fight of faith, so he exhorts you to "[pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph 6:18).

Lastly, serving God and serving our brethren trains and disciplines us for our race. How do you learn love that is patient and kind, that bears and endures all things (1 Cor 13:4, 7) if you don't continue in loving your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:39)? Jesus disciplined and trained himself for his sufferings and temptations all the way to the cross by serving and loving God and his brethren (Heb 5:8; Phil 2:8).

"Endure for Discipline"

The runners the author had in mind are Old Testament "witnesses" (Heb 12:1) who are "commended" for their faith (Heb 11:39). The English word "martyr" comes from a Greek root word that was translated "witnesses" and "commended." So the martyrs of the early church were witnesses to their faith and gained the approval of Christ and a good reputation among the people because of their righteous works.

A second meaning to the word "witnesses" has been proposed: they are spectators watching saints who are still alive running the race of life in an arena. But this cannot be, since there is no other Scripture text that portrays saints in heaven who are watching saints on earth. Also, the joy of these saints in heaven will not be complete if they are watching their loved ones and brethren suffering in this world.

Our spiritual lives are also like a 26-mile marathon. They are a long struggle with sufferings, trials and afflictions, and so require endurance. We are to run and finish the course. Our spiritual growth requires our active participation and endurance. The writer exhorts us to run with endurance the whole course of our lives set before us. It must not surprise us if we struggle and suffer as Christians in this life, so we need endurance, *"you endured a hard struggle with sufferings... For you have need of endurance* (Heb 10:32, 36).

Endurance also often involves discipline sent by God. In verses 5-8, the author quotes a very familiar verse in Proverbs 3:11-12, *"My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights."* All of us parents and grandparents know how important and how difficult it is to discipline our children. Discipline and training are both painful, not only for our children, but also for us parents. But it must be done for their sake. The lack of respect for authority, the foul words, and the wayward behavior we often see today are primarily the result of the failure of parents in this important mission. Churches have also failed in teaching godliness to our children.

Our children, especially teenagers, do not like our discipline. They can't wait until they're 18 to get out of the house. Discipline is painful and unpleasant, and we as parents know this because we too were teenagers once. We didn't see why we got spanked or grounded, why we were not allowed to go to some parties, or to date someone whom we liked. How many of you have heard your mother tell you after you question her discipline, "Because I'm the Mom!" But now we look back and see how our parents' wealth of wisdom and experience saved us from ruining our lives.

In the same way, God has perfect wisdom, knowing what's best for his children (Rom 8:28). He doesn't rebuke us through sufferings because he doesn't love us. On the contrary, our heavenly Father disciplines us because we are his children, and what parents don't discipline their children? What would have become of us if God allowed us to do whatever pleasure we wanted? The straying psalmist knew this when he says in Psalm 119:67, *"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word."* Discipline is a normal part of the parents-children relationship.

Therefore, the author says in verse 10-11, *"[God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness... [and] later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."* God's purposes in disciplining us are for our good: so we may live holy and righteous lives (Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 3:14; 4:14).

We recall some mothers today who did not only discipline their children, but also prayed without ceasing for them. Monica, a 4th-century mother of three children in North Africa, prayed for many years for one of her sons. This son lived a life of sensuality and other excesses common to young men. In the end, Monica's prayers were answered. This son became known as Saint Augustine, or Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest Christian theologians in history. Another mother, known as Macrina the Elder, also lived in a time of great persecution in the 4th century. Her family fled their home and lived in a forest for seven years, all their possessions confiscated. But they endured hardship, and two of her grandsons became great theologians: Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, both of whom defended the doctrine of the Trinity against heretics. And what can we say about grandmother Lois and mother Eunice, who both bequeathed their sincere faith to Timothy? (2 Tim 1:5)

The race of life before us is long. The finish line is never in sight until the last few hundred meters. So while we run the race, our sights must be fixed on the race course, with its twists and turns, uphill and downhill, smooth and rough places, in the heat and cold wind. We can't take it easy because the way to eternal life is narrow and full of obstacles. Near the end of the race, all our preparations, discipline and running through the race will be in sight. The goal, the finish line, will be around the last turn, the last hill, and the last rough place. Our gold medal awaits.

And what is this finish line, this gold medal? The writer says as we run this race, *"[Look] to Jesus, the author 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."* Near the end of Paul's life, he says he has finished the race, fought the good fight, and kept the faith (2 Tim 4:7-8). His reward from Christ waits at the finish line: the crown of righteousness and eternal life.

As we run the race of life, we are not to be distracted by the pleasures and temptations of the world around us. Christ is the founder, author, forerunner and champion of our faith. Our gaze must be on our goal, our finish line: Jesus himself. He "blazed the trail" for us at the cross. On the cross, he finished his work of saving us, making us "perfect" in God's sight, because he himself is perfectly righteous. When Jesus is our goal, we can keep the faith and finish the long and difficult race set before us. He is our finish line, because he himself endured all the sufferings and God-forsakenness on the cross. He looked past the shame and suffering on the cross, because he

looked forward to the joy that awaited him after he finishes his race. This joy is that *“he will see his offspring”*—the multitudes of people that will be accounted righteous on his account. And that he will *“prolong his days”* into eternity after his resurrection (Isa 53:10).

“Strengthen Your Feeble Arms and Weak Knees”

At some points during a race, a runner may feel exhausted, his body sore and lame. The track seems to be uneven with bumps and potholes, making running more difficult. His body tells him to quit the race. But the author exhorts his readers in the face of exhaustion, spiritually and physically, from sufferings and persecution, *“strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.”* This comes from Isaiah 35:3-4, *“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not!’”* The prophet encourages Israel to be strong in the Lord, even after he disciplines them for their rebellion through defeat and exile. In the same way, he also exhorts us today to be strong in Christ, because he restores us after we stray.

Our author sees the sad state of the Hebrew church because some have not endured and left. There is disunity because of various opinions, people taking sides. There is bitterness because of feeling abandoned, rejected, and betrayal by those who left. Those who left are like Esau, who after selling his birthright for a bowl of soup, became bitter because God rejected him.

So the preacher exhorts them to do two things. First, *“strive for peace with everyone,”* because without peace, there will be disunity and bitterness. Second, strive for *“the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* They had been made perfect by faith in Christ’s perfect work on the cross. Now they must evidence this faith through holy living, even in the face of sufferings and persecution.

Dear Friends, as you run the Christian race in this world, God encourages you to let go of all the worldly baggage you’re carrying. Train your hearts and minds with God’s Word and prayer and communion with your brothers and sisters in the church. Fix your gaze upon your finish line, Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith, who made you perfectly clean with his blood. Do not be discouraged and distracted by sufferings and temptations all around you. And do not reject the discipline and rebuke that God sends you when you stray from the race course.

And like Christ, consider the joy and glory set before you when you finish the long and difficult race that God has set before you. Because Christ is the author and finisher of your faith, be assured that he will complete the good work he has begun in you (Phil 1:6). At the finish line, a laurel branch of honor and glory—the crown of righteousness—awaits you. At the end of your pilgrimage, Jesus himself will welcome you there, saying, *“Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your master”* (Matt 25:21). The great cloud of witnesses waiting for your finishing sprint from ages back, together with all the heavenly host, will also burst into celebration, saying, *“Welcome home, faithful friend!”*