

“Run the Straight Race through God’s Good Grace”
(Hebrews 12:1-11 – Pentecost 13 – September 7, 2025)

Hebrews 12:1-11 – ¹*Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. ⁴You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. ⁵And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; ⁶for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” ⁷If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ⁸But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. ¹¹Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

Dear fellow Redeemed in Christ Jesus:

Running a marathon takes endurance. Sometimes during the 26 mile race, runners must endure the grueling heat and the long uphill climbs that are part of marathons. It is normal for some runners to drop out during the race. What a test of endurance! But then what a joyful conclusion, as each runner crosses the finish line after a race well run!

Our text encourages us to “*run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (vs. 1). The Christian life is compared to a race, a contest of keeping our eyes of faith focused on our heavenly goal in Jesus. We are encouraged to **“Run the Straight Race through God’s Good Grace”** as we sang in the hymn (“*Fight the Good Fight*”), because we have **1) God’s grace for the duration, 2) God’s grace for the struggle, and 3) God’s grace for the motivation.**

1) God’s grace for the duration

Our text reminds us of all the saints who have gone before us, for whom God has already provided grace for the duration. It says: “*We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*” (vs. 1). The image is that of an athletic contest, like a marathon, when spectators along the sidelines cheer on the runners. These witnesses are the heroes of faith,

who have finished the race by God's grace and now enjoy their heavenly goal. They are those we read of in Hebrews 11 – from Abel, to Enoch, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, to all who persevered in the faith, despite facing trials, persecution, and death for the faith. Hebrews 11:13 says: *“These all died in faith.”* They passed from this world trusting God's promise of salvation in Christ, and God faithfully brought them home to heaven. And they are witnesses that God will give us grace for the duration and bring us home by faith, too.

If it were not for the grace of God in Christ, we would not make it to the finish line. How often, when we have found ourselves running under the grueling heat of temptation, we have not kept up the pace by keeping God's commandments and living a holy life. When we have found ourselves in the difficult uphill climbs of trials, we have complained against God's leading. We have not always kept to the course He set before us, but we have veered off to paths that seemed easier and run in ways that seemed pleasing to our sinful flesh. We have run the way that brought more cheers from the world.

By God's grace, getting to heaven does not depend on our sinful performance, but on the sinless race His Son ran for us. For the certainty of God's grace for the duration, our text encourages us to keep *“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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”* (vs. 2). Jesus came to win the race and the prize of heaven for us. As the perfect Son of God in our flesh, He always ran the straight race His Father set before Him. He endured the grueling heat of temptations and the long uphill climb of trials, always obeying His Father without any complaint. Then for the joy of saving us for eternal life, Jesus endured that final agony of death of the cross. He went the distance to pay for all our sin, to conquer Satan and death for us. Then He rose in victory to God's right hand. There He pleads our innocence before His Father on the basis of His judgment in our place. He pleads our right to life on the basis of His death for us.

Now by joining us to His Son in baptism and faith, God calls us His saints – His holy ones in Christ. Like all the saints have gone before, we do not plead our own merit, but only the merit of Christ for us. We join that great cloud of witnesses, *“looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith”*; with this promise in Philippians 1:6: *“He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”* He will keep us in faith, as He brings us His grace and salvation through His Word and Sacrament. And at last, He will bring us home to heaven, where we will rest from our earthly race.

2) God's grace for the struggle

In Jesus, we have God's grace for the duration. And until we reach our heavenly goal, we can run the straight race because we have God's grace for the struggle.

Our text assumes that, as we run the race this side of heaven, we will face a struggle. It says: *“You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin”* (vs. 4). The word

for “*striving*” gets at the intense contest, as one struggles against the opposition. Most of us have not been called on to witness our faith in Jesus with our own blood; though Christians today in parts of the world do endure imprisonment, torture, and even death for the true faith.

But even if we do not face such opposition, God calls us to stand firm through hardships that come. We know what a struggle it is to run the straight race of faith, when all around there are not cheers but jeers. The world calls our hope in the cross of Christ “*foolishness*” (1 Corinthians 1:18). We are led by a different Spirit from the evil spirit the world is led by (Ephesians 2:2; 1 Corinthians 2:12). We received the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11), who gives us spiritual life as the children of God. By God’s Holy Spirit in us, we can strive against sin and evil. We can resist our own sinful flesh. We can resist the pressure of Satan and the world to give up the race, the temptation to give up our Christian witness in order to be accepted and fit in.

In all this, it is good to know we have God’s grace for the struggle. “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” (Romans 8:1). Even in the most difficult times, He cares for us as His children in Christ whom He loves.

As it says: “*And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives’ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?*” (vs. 5-7).

Here we see that from our heavenly Father’s point of view, every hardship we struggle with in our race ultimately fits into His plan of loving chastisement. Through our trials, He is disciplining us and shaping us for our good. Do we suffer with health problems? Do family concerns burden us? Are we emotionally distressed? Are we confused about which direction to take? Do we mourn the loss of loved ones? Are we rejected for our faith?

In the heat of the race, in the long uphill climb, our heavenly Father gives us grace for the struggle. He turns our eyes again to His Son who endured the cross for us, to remind us that our eternal life is secure in Him. Our hardships are not to pay for our sins; for God has already laid all the punishment for our sins on His Son (Hebrews 7:27). How different it is when we can face life’s hardships, not under the burden of guilt or the threat of punishment, but in the peace of God’s forgiveness and love in Christ.

Whatever struggle you face, do not be discouraged; for you stand in God’s good grace. Through our hardships, our loving heavenly Father is shaping us for our good. It says He chastens us “*for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the*

peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (vs. 10-11). Our heavenly Father is letting us experience discipline to keep us near to Him. He is not letting us stray under that false spirit by which the world is led; but He is guiding us by His Spirit in the truth of His Word. He is not letting us believe we can run the straight race by our own strength; but in our weakness His strength is being made perfect. In our weakness, He is bringing us to rely on His all-sufficient grace for us in Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9). So we can run the straight race because we have God’s grace for the struggle.

3) God's grace for the motivation

Finally, we have God’s grace for the motivation. Again, our motivation for running the straight race is in looking to Jesus as *“the author and finisher of our faith”* (vs. 2).

As we look to Him and listen to His Word, He keeps us from veering off course and trying to make a false paradise in this world – for we see Him who endured the cross for the joy of giving us His real paradise in heaven. When spiritual forces in the world pressure us, we can look to Jesus *“who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest [we] become weary and discouraged in [our] souls”* (vs. 3) – for we know that even if people are ashamed of us, Jesus is not ashamed to acknowledge us before His Father. As we look to Jesus, He motivates us to *“lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and... run with endurance the race that is set before us”* (vs. 1) – for He has called us to far greater things. To keep looking to Jesus is to say with Paul in Philippians 3:13-14: *“forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* Therefore:

Run the straight race through God’s good grace;
Lift up your eyes, and seek His face.
Life with its way before us lies;
Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.

A marathon runner may finish the race and feel joy in victory. But think of the far greater joy that awaits us at the finish line, when Jesus places His heavenly crown of life on our heads (Revelation 2:10)! Think of the great cheering multitude who will greet us, all the saints who have gone before us in faith. Together forever, we will praise the author and finisher of our faith who has enabled us to say: *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”* (2 Timothy 4:7). With our eyes fixed on Jesus, we are running the race victoriously; for we have God’s grace for the duration, God’s grace for the struggle, and God’s grace for the motivation.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.