

# “The Founder and Perfecter of Our Faith”

## The Twenty Second in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

*Texts: Hebrews 12:1-17; Proverbs 3:1-12*

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Several biblical writers tell us that the Christian life is like a race. The starting line is our conversion. The finish line is our death, hopefully after a long and full life, unless our Lord should return prior to our demise. As we run this race, we are to look ahead to the finish line—that inheritance which is ours in Jesus Christ. In chapter eleven the author of Hebrews told his readers that the Old Testament saints looked forward to that time when God fulfilled his promise through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In chapter twelve he now directs us to consider the goal which God has set before those of us living in the new covenant era. As he sets this goal before our eyes, he exhorts us not to hinder our own progress through carelessness, or by rejecting the place of godly discipline. It is Jesus who perfectly trusted in God’s promise and gave his life for our sins, thereby earning the title of the founder and perfecter of faith. Jesus not only fulfills God’s promise, he is God’s promise. Jesus is that one in whom we possess all the blessings promised to us by our gracious God. It is to him we look as we run the race.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Hebrews, and now we come to chapter 12, in which the author applies the message of chapter 11, the so-called “hall of faith” to the congregation which has just considered the names and exploits mentioned by the author. In Hebrews 11—one of the best known portions of the New Testament—the author has made the point that there is one covenant promise throughout the course of redemptive history. All those mentioned in the “hall of faith” believed that promise, though for them, the promise was not yet fulfilled. But now that Jesus Christ has come, what was promised to those listed in Hebrews 11 is a reality for all those who live in the era of a new and better covenant. The Old Testament saints trusted God’s promise, and now that Jesus Christ has come, they too have been made perfect, as have all those reading this letter who have placed their faith (trust) in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the creator of all things, and the redeemer of God’s people.

In the first half of chapter 12 (vv. 1-17), the author turns first to Christ’s work on our behalf in fulfilling that promise referred to in chapter 11 by suffering and dying for his people (vv. 1-2). In verses 3-11, the author takes up the necessity for Christians to endure under the hardship they were facing *because* they were Christians, and to realize that God disciplines his own because he loves us. This was an important word of encouragement to those in the original audience who are facing persecution from the civil authorities, and possibly from those whom they left behind in the synagogues. Then, in verses 12-17, the author exhorts us to persevere in that long and grueling race which is the Christian life.

Since we have much ground to cover, we turn to our text, verses 1-17 of Hebrews 12.

It was clear, I hope, from our time in Hebrews 11, that the author’s primary reason for preparing a list of Old Testament saints was not that they serve as examples for us, but to make the point that all those mentioned there believed the same covenant promise which is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As the author told us at the end of the chapter, “*though commended through their faith, [they] did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*” Along this same line, recall that the author has already told us in Hebrews 2:10, “*for it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.*” Believers in both testaments are made perfect

through our faith in Jesus, who himself was made perfect through his own suffering throughout his life (his active obedience) and upon the cross (his passive obedience).

Given the author's purpose in writing this letter—to warn Jews in this church who had come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah of the importance of persevering to the end of their lives in faith—it was necessary for him to make sure his original audience understood that the perfection which God required could not come through the law, because we are sinners—and for sinners, the law can only bring condemnation. The law provides no remedy for the guilt of our sin, and the law only increases and intensifies it. As the author stated in Hebrews 10:1, “*for since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.*” The law cannot bring about perfection, because the law can only condemn sinners. Yet Jesus was made perfect through his suffering (in both his active and passive obedience). The Old Testament saints cannot be made perfect apart from Christ even though they believed the promise, for as the author tells us in verse 23 of this chapter (Hebrews 12), the critical difference between hoping in the promise and being perfect is the coming of Jesus Christ, that one in whom we (and they) are made perfect.

So, in light of what has gone before, in verse 1 of chapter 12, the author shifts from the “hall of faith” to the person and work of Christ, concluding “*therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside . . .*” The cloud of witnesses is a reference those just listed in Hebrews 11. This verse is often used to support the belief that those who have already died in Christ can observe us as we go about our lives—grandma in heaven is part of that cloud of witnesses now watching me struggle here on earth. But the author is not referring to what the dead can observe regarding our daily lives. Instead, he refers to that about which the witnesses in chapter 11 testify—the faithfulness of God in keeping all his covenant promises.<sup>1</sup> Those in the “hall of faith” all bear witness to the fact that God keeps his promises. They are that cloud of witnesses who testify to the greatness of God's covenant promise which is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So, this verse has nothing to do with whether or not the saints in heaven can see what is going on upon the earth.

Keeping the testimony of the Old Testament saints before us then, we are to “*lay aside*” (in the sense of getting rid of) those things which will hinder us as we go forward in the Christian life. These hindrances include “*every weight, and sin which clings so closely.*” Like Paul, who used an athletic metaphor when speaking of the Christian life in 1 Corinthians 9:24-25—“*do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*” [reward]—so too, does the author of Hebrews. Just as an athlete who runs a race does not carry extra weight which will only slow themselves down, so too, Christians should not carelessly add the weight of sin. Sin is like wet clothing which clings to us, hinders us, and restricts our efforts. Sin can even trip us up as we run the race (i.e., the Christian life). With this athletic metaphor in mind, the author exhorts us let us “*run with endurance the race that is set before us.*”

As an athlete trains hard, prepares well in advance for the big race, and struggles not to quit and give up when their lungs feel like they are about to explode, so too Christians are to take the same attitude toward the Christian life. To put it yet another way, the Christian life will be very tough—like a race (or even a marathon). It will not be easy—we are never told anywhere in Scripture that the Christian life will be

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 333.

anything less than an intense struggle with sin. We will, at times, desire to give up and quit. We know that the Christian life will require tremendous work, great diligence, as well as persistence. There are no short-cuts. And yet, through faith in Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives us every resource we need to complete the race, and to win the prize. This is what the discipline of God is intended to teach us.

As we run this life-long race, the author instructs us to direct our focus toward the goal. In verse 2, he writes, “*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.*” To run the race so as to finish, we must look to Jesus who is both the founder and the perfecter of our faith. As we read a moment ago in Hebrews 2:10, the author has already told us the Jesus is founder of our salvation, and was himself made perfect through his own suffering throughout the course of his life, as well as on the cross. Here in chapter 12, verse 2, the author speaks of Jesus as the founder (or as is commonly translated “author”) of our faith.

The Greek word he uses (*archegon*) often has the sense of being a pioneer, i.e., someone who has blazed a trail where no one has gone before.<sup>2</sup> In light of chapter 11, the meaning here is that Jesus too believed God’s covenant promise so as to establish that perfection which he, in turn, gives to us. Recall the words of Matthew 27:43, uttered by those who watched Jesus die on the cross. “*He [Jesus] trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’*” Like those mentioned in Hebrews 11, Jesus did indeed trust in God’s promise—all the way unto death.

Yet the point is not that Jesus is the first to run the race, and that we are emulate him (i.e., we are to have faith like Jesus had). Rather, the point is that Jesus trusted his father’s promise to the point that he drank the cup of wrath down to the bitter dregs, and went to the cross believing that God would raise him from the dead. By believing God’s promise all the way unto death, Jesus thereby accomplished everything necessary so that we might have faith—Jesus’ death and resurrection become the object of our faith, so that we look to what he did for us to save us from our sins (faith/trust). In other words, Jesus blazed that trail from death to life, so that by trusting in what he did for us and in our place, we might have eternal life and be made perfect. In this sense then, Jesus is not only the (founder) trailblazer who becomes the object of our faith, but he is described as the perfecter of faith. By having completed the work of redemption he has made both himself and us, perfect.

In light of what Jesus has accomplished, in verse 3, the author directs those in the original congregation to “*consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*” Jesus has accomplished everything necessary for sinners to be saved. Jesus suffered throughout the course of his life when he gave up the glory of heaven to take to himself a true human nature. He lived and walked among those of us whom he knew would hate him. He knew he would suffer rejection and humiliation by his people, while at the same time obeying every commandment of God. Although entirely innocent himself, he was put to death for our sins. When we hear the exhortation in verse 3 to run the race in light of what Jesus endured, it is only natural to think that the author’s intent is that when we suffer persecution, we should consider the horrible things which Jesus suffered and how he endured to the end, and so that we are motivated to persevere, because our suffering is so much less than his.

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce, Hebrews 337.

But that is the not right perspective here. A better way to understand the author's exhortation is as follows. We when suffer and then complain about our circumstances, we ought remember that Jesus did not complain. He was perfectly obedient, even unto death. When we wear out, tire, and give up, Jesus did not. He persevered to the bitter end before receiving the reward. Jesus was made perfect and is now seated at God's right hand where he performs his priestly work to ensure that God sees us as though we had suffered without complaint, as though we had endured the race without tiring or quitting, and so that when we fail to accomplish what God has for us, we know that Jesus accomplished all of it for us and in our place. So when I whine and complain about suffering, God sees Christ's joy. When I tire and give up, God sees Christ's endurance. When my sin weighs me down and causes me to stumble, God sees a bloody cross and a life of perfect obedience. Yes, Jesus is the founder and perfecter of faith, but now that I am in him, I know that God will not condemn me, and so I begin to endure suffering. I get back up and get in the race. And I too despise the sin which weighs me down. As someone once put it, the only proper motivation for the Christian is not guilt (Jesus suffered far more than I did so I shouldn't complain), but gratitude (he was the perfect sufferer who suffered for me and in my place).

In verse 4, the author continues his exhortation to a congregation going through the midst of very difficult suffering and persecution. He writes, "*in your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*" The author's point is that the real struggle is not so much external (persecution), as difficult as those trials might be. The real struggle is with indwelling sin. None of those receiving this letter had been put to death (yet), but all of them still face a real and determined foe—their own sinful nature. As any wise military tactician will point out, "know your enemy." The enemy who can destroy this congregation is not a soldier with a sword, nor the elders of a synagogue instructing the current members to shun those former members who now profess faith in Christ. The author's point is that your real enemy in the Christian life looks back at you in the mirror.

As he has done previously in this letter, in verses 5-8 the author directs the congregation back to the Old Testament, with which they would have been well-familiar, and then makes his point about the necessity and value of discipline. Quoting from Proverbs 3 (our Old Testament lesson), he writes, "*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.*" Every parent knows both the importance and difficulty of disciplining children. Discipline is something we as parents must do for the good and the well-being of our children, lest they grow up undisciplined, without the proper categories of right and wrong, and so are unable to navigate this life.

We discipline our children because we love them. So too, God disciplines us because we are his children whom he loves. If God allowed us to go our own way, if he allowed us to indulge our sinful nature (the flesh) whenever and however we please, and if he was apathetic toward us and either ignored us or shunned us when we needed instruction and/or correction, then what would become of us? The fact that God disciplines us, the author points out, is the proof that he loves us. How often and fervently do we pray when things go well? How deeply do we consider sound doctrine until our own beliefs are challenged? How lightly do we take the cross until we must come face to face with our own sins and the depravity of our own hearts? Admittedly, we cannot put ourselves in the shoes of those in the original congregation facing the kind of persecution the author implies, but we can understand how easy it is to take our commitment to Christ for granted when no one ever really challenges our loyalties.

Therefore, we should not despise the discipline of the Lord because it is both a sign of his love, and it is given for our good. We should see this discipline as one of the ways in which God prepares us to run the race (live the Christian life) and to receive that inheritance we will receive when we complete the race. In fact, as the author reminds us in verses 9-10, *“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.”* All of us were children at one time, and we all know that quite often parental discipline was appropriate. Our earthly fathers (according to the flesh) did, or do, the best they can. Our heavenly Father (our spiritual father—the Father of Spirits)<sup>3</sup> has both the will and the power to do what is best for us (our ultimate good), even if we don’t see it, like it, or understand it.

The author of Hebrews knows full well that sinful people prefer to do what they want, whenever they want, without the threat of discipline. And every parent knows that it would just be far easier to let our kids do what they want, rather than make the effort to discipline. In verse 11, he writes of something we all understand. *“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.”* However little we like it, and despite the fact we would rather not go through it, discipline is a good thing. It is a relative good when we are (were) disciplined by our parents. But when God disciplines us, it leads to the peaceful fruit of righteousness. The Psalmist knew this. In the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm we read, *“before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word . . . It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.”* There are times I wish this were not true, but it is, and God does indeed discipline us because he loves us. And the fact is that we are sinners who need such discipline.

Having made his point about Jesus being the founder and perfecter of faith, and then having pointed out that godly discipline is both necessary and a sign of God’s love, in verses 12-17 the author exhorts us to endure whatever it is that is before us. Returning to his athletic metaphor, he tells us in verses 12-13, *“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.”* Just as athletes are to endure that bodily weakness, and pain and soreness which inevitably arises when we strive to run the race, so too, the words which he chooses have an important theological context for his Jewish readers. The language chosen by the author echoes the Old Testament, specifically two passages taken from Proverbs and Isaiah which were written to encourage Jews living in exile. No doubt, that is how those Jews felt who had become Christians, and were now being persecuted by those Jewish friends and family they left behind in the synagogue. Jews who trusted in Christ likely felt like exiles. As the exiles were exhorted to persevere despite the hardships of exile, so too the author of Hebrews exhorts us (using his athletic metaphor) to shake off the burn and the pain, and endure, running the race to the end.

In verse 14, the author drops the athletic metaphor and makes a very pointed and often mis-interpreted point. *“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* In a church struggling with members making professions of faith in Christ and then renouncing him when the going got rough, it would be especially vital for those who remain behind in a depleted church to strive for peace. The need to strive for peace in the church is a common theme throughout the New Testament, especially in the letters of Paul. The author’s point here is, “strive for peace.” Not much controversy with that. But it is the second half of this verse which is disputed. What does the author mean when he says, “without holiness, no one will see the Lord?”

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<sup>3</sup> See the discussion in; Bruce, Hebrews, 344.

Some take the author to mean the same thing Paul means when he uses the verb *hagiazien* (sanctify).<sup>4</sup> When viewed this way, the author's meaning is that all those in Christ are already rendered perfect, and will therefore manifest that perfection through godly living, which in context here means enduring those trials and tribulations by running the race so as to see the Lord at the end of the race. Others (perfectionists of various stripes) take this exhortation to mean that unless we persevere to the end (run the race without committing apostasy) and unless we manifest sufficient holiness, we will not see God. The first interpretation is that those in Christ will manifest the holiness which is already theirs in Christ by persevering during trials. The other interpretation is conditional—unless we demonstrate sufficient holiness by persevering during trials, we will not see God. I take the former to be the author's point, namely that those who have been called by Christ to partake in his holiness and perfection, will manifest that holiness by enduring throughout the Christian life (running the race) and by accepting the discipline of the Father. Those who have left the church, do not endure. They reject God's discipline because they don't like it and prefer to take an easier route—namely being accepted by non-Christian pagans, or by their Jewish friends and family.

In verse 15, the author issues another warning to those who pursue peace and manifest holiness. *“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”* Those who fail to obtain grace are those mentioned in Hebrews 6, people who were once enlightened and who partook of the heavenly gift, only to fall away. It also refers to those mentioned in Hebrews 10, who deliberately sin (turn away from Christ) after coming to a knowledge of the truth. The reference to the bitter root comes from Deuteronomy 29:18, which refers to those Israelites who turned away from YHWH to follow other gods. The author's warning to this church is therefore simple and straightforward. Do not let sin fester, but deal with sin immediately before it causes further trouble and brings great shame to the cause of Christ.

In verses 16-17, the author gets a bit more specific. See to it *“that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.”* Christians cannot behave like Gentiles, and engage in premarital sex, extramarital sex, or homosexual acts. This was a constant theme in the churches of the New Testament era as biblical sexual ethics collided with Greco-Roman (pagan) sexuality. Christians are to be chaste. The reference to Esau is that either he was sexually immoral (although the Genesis account does not say so) or else he is an object lesson to those who are sexual immoral or consumed by the root of bitterness, in that their actions have consequences and may lead to great loss, like Esau losing his birthright. It is necessary that the church must deal with this plague before the disease spreads throughout the entire body.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us from this passage?

Because we are in Christ through faith, we have already been made perfect. Therefore, the author's point is simple—we are to act like we've been made perfect in Christ, and that we must run the race (the Christian life) to the end, despite every temptation to give up. We must learn to accept the discipline of the Lord as both a sign of his love for us because we are his children, and because such discipline is for our ultimate good. But to keep running the race when we desire to give up, we need to keep our eyes on the finish line—that one who is the founder and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ our Lord. For he has died for all our sins, and his perfect suffering and endurance have been reckoned to us.

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<sup>4</sup> Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 122-123.