

Teaching Time

Hebrews 12:1-3

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- January 25, 2026

Well, good morning, Grace Covenant. I'm here in a short-sleeved shirt and it's seventy degrees. It's Thursday. But now it's freezing cold. I'm glad that you guys are staying home and enjoying the warmth of your house. We'll just have church in living rooms today, à la COVID.

Anyway, the passage we're supposed to look at is in Romans 8, and it's the last paragraph or so, which is the climax of that chapter. So, we're supposed to be looking at the best part of the best chapter, and not very many people are going to be here, so I'm saving that for next week.

So, today we're going to look at Hebrews 12:1-3. And the reason we're going there is I have found in my experience that what may be one of the hardest aspects of the Christian life is endurance—running the race—the whole race. And it's way more than a marathon; it's an ultramarathon.

And so, I have found myself gravitating towards a passage in the Bible that helped inspire me and give me purpose and direction in the simple context of endurance all the way to the end; finish well.

Hebrews 12:1-3

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, ² 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. ³ Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Hebrews 12:1-3 and most of the chapter is written just for that purpose. Let me read those first three sentences. The author says, "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”—watch this—“may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

These sentences are written so that you and I will not grow weary or fainthearted. In these three sentences there is only one word that is found in all three. It's the word “endure” or “endurance.”

Hebrews 12, verse 1, tells us that life is a race. And the word “race” that's used here (they could have used a different word) is the Greek word *agon*, as in “agony.” This race is going to bring us to anguish.

I used to be a runner. I ran three miles a day before school started when I was in grad school. And I remember vividly the last day I ran. It was a Tuesday morning, it was 6:30, it was dark, and it was probably 40 degrees and raining. And I went out to the corner, and I started loosening up, and I started running, and I saw someone getting their newspaper, standing on the front porch, looking at me and shaking their head like I was an idiot. And at that moment I was soaking wet and it was dark and cold, and I thought, “I am. I could be in bed.” So, I turned around and got back in bed, and I haven't run since then.

And do you know why? Agony. I mean, the word means “pain.” The author is maybe trying to manage expectations saying that the Christian life is a race and that race is a painful one. Get ready for that.

And he's inspiring us by saying that we're surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. So, clearly the picture here is being in some kind of coliseum, maybe the original Olympics. And the stadium is filled with this cloud of witnesses. And who are they? Well, more than likely, since the verse starts off with “therefore,” you look for what is before the “therefore,” which is Hebrews 11. That chapter is just a list of the hall of fame of Old Testament saints: Abraham, Moses, Noah—our forefathers in faith—are inspiring us by saying, “Look, yeah, I know what you went through. I did that too.” And they're cheering us on.

I would say that in that cloud of witnesses would also be the angelic realm that is out to set us up for success. The angels want to help being part of delivering us from temptation and giving us strength in times of need.

It's those men and women in the stands that inspire us to do things that we wouldn't normally do.



In 1531, Thomas Bilney was in Europe and had a serious conviction that every saint should be able to read their Bibles. And because of that value and all he did to make the Bible accessible he was burned at the stake.



And while he was burning there was someone there named Hugh Latimer. And he was puzzled that someone would give their very life for such a value. And so, he looked into it, and investigated Christianity and the meaning and the purpose of the Bible and how important it is for us to read that. And so, Hugh becomes a believer and ends up being an archbishop in the Anglican church.



Now when Bloody Mary was taking reign and earning her reputation for killing Protestants, it was Hugh that would be put to a pole and lit on fire. And while he was there, he was with another archbishop named Ridley. And Ridley couldn't understand how Hugh was so composed and even filled with joy. And Hugh told him, "Be of good cheer, Master Ridley. Today we shall light a flame in England that no one will be able to extinguish." He was able to find his courage from the saints who were already in the stands looking at him. He realized that if they could do it, he could do it. So, he endured suffering all the way to the end.

The passage says that we're to lay aside every weight, every sin that clings to us so closely. Now, that's an easy thing to imagine, right? You see the way Olympians race today.

They race in almost nothing. And in the Roman times that he was referring to, they would show up in those beautiful gowns or robes. But when it was time to run, they ran naked, because they didn't want anything to encumber them in any way.

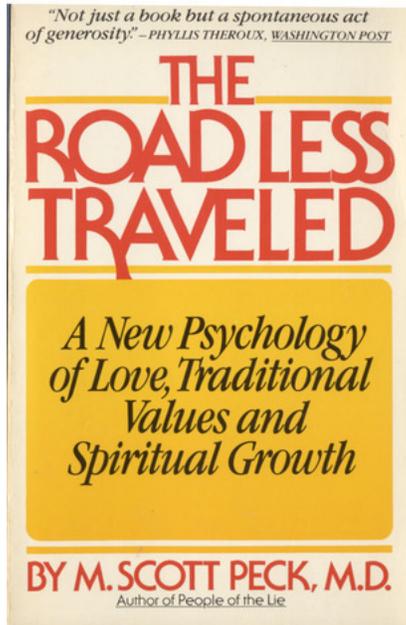
Maybe some of you were runners in high school and they had you run with the weighted socks or leg weights so that you would get stronger and stronger. But could you ever imagine showing up to a meet, an actual competition, and you still had leg weights on? Absolutely not.

So, the writer here is saying it's not just sin. It's not just asking the question: *Is this bad for my running?* But also think of it as the discipline of the professional athlete: *Is this good for my running?* Certainly, it's easy for me to get rid of bitterness or anger, jealousy, vanity. But sometimes it's good things that you just don't need to be doing. *Maybe this television show is neutral, but is it any good?*

So, the author here is saying to look at life. It's agony. And when you're running, run completely unencumbered, not just by sin, but also by things that are not good for your spiritual life.

The race that this writer is referring to is, as he says, "the race that is marked out for you." In cross country races they don't have a track. They don't run around in circles for long distances. Rather, they just send you on your way. And that particular race is marked out for you. They put flags out that say, "Turn left here," or another colored flag that says, "Turn right." Other colored flags mean to keep going straight. The point is that it's a custom-made course for each particular event or race.

And the author is trying to show us, *Hey, you have that too. And it's going to be hard, so set your expectations with that in mind.*



When I was reading and studying the passage this week, I couldn't help but think of M. Scott Peck's famous work that many of us might have read in the seventies and eighties, *The Road Less Traveled*. This was a runaway best seller. People liked reading this book. This is the first sentence--this is the first paragraph. This is how to write a best seller. Here it is—ready?

Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. Most do not fully see this truth, that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens and their difficulties, as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy.
---M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*

“Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. Most do not fully see this truth, that life is difficult. Instead, they moan, more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens and their difficulties, as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy.” It was never meant to be easy.

So, what Peck is saying here is what the writer of Hebrews is saying: life is hard. And each one of us have a race that has been plotted out for us. And some of our paths lead to the doctor's office, some to a jail cell, some just to a calculus class. It's going to be hard any of these

ways. And the writer wants us to know that this is how we are to live our lives, with every expectation that we can thrive, because we're not going to grow weary.

Hebrews 12:2

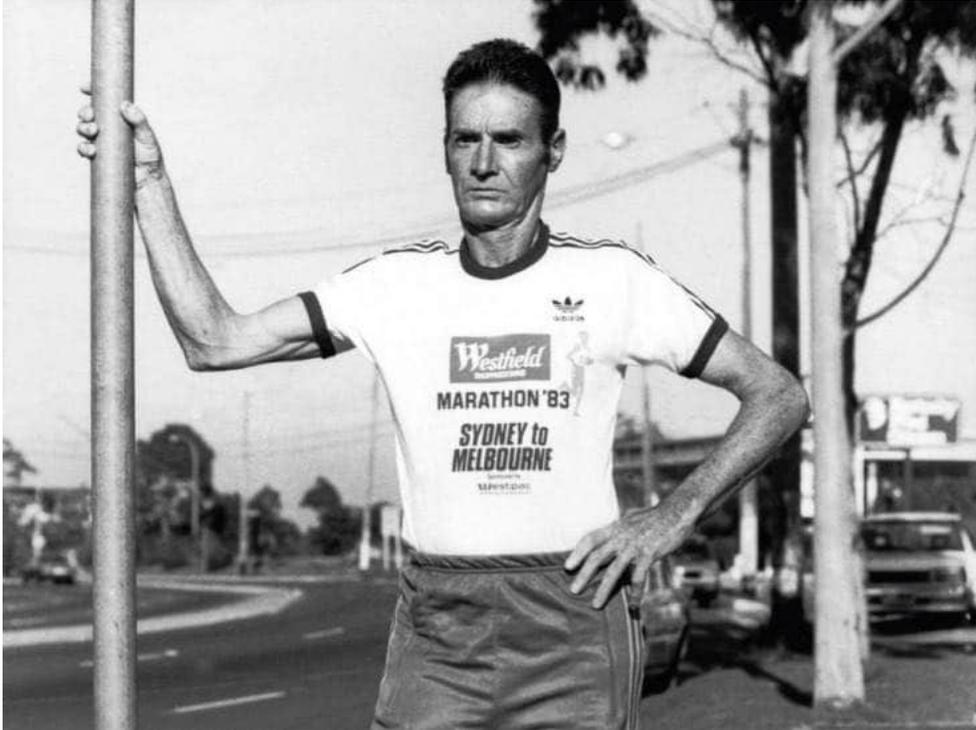
...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And how do we do that? The next sentence says to look at the person who designed the race. Look at Jesus as an example, for multiple reasons. Verse 2 says, "...looking to Jesus, the founder and the 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."

Jesus is the ultimate pacesetter. Jesus's example is how we're supposed to live our lives. We're supposed to mimic His running style in many ways.

This reminds me of an international change in how we do things in ultramarathons. This is a great story. In 1983 in Australia they had an ultramarathon that was 573.7 miles. It was from Sydney to Melbourne. And all these ultramarathoners showed up and they're given their numbers. It was invitation only. Then this sixty-one year old rancher, a sheep herder, shows up to this event. Everyone thinks it's a gag, but he says, "No, I want to do this. I run a lot. I chase the sheep all over the desert, and I want to see how well I can do."

So, they give him a number just to acquiesce and humor him. And then when the gun goes off all the other guys are dressed in their regalia, sponsored by Nike and Adidas. And he shows up in overalls, and he has galoshes over his boots. The shot is fired and everybody starts off the 573-mile race sprinting. He doesn't. He starts shuffling. He's dragging his feet. His name is Cliff Young. And the people at the start of the race are all laughing at him. And so, Cliff Young just starts his shuffle.



Five days later—five days, fourteen hours, and four minutes later—Cliff Young crossed the finish line first. He crossed first! It wasn't a photo finish. He beat the second-place person by nine hours and fifty-six minutes—ten hours. The closet guy to him was ten hours later! That shuffle? No one's laughing now. It's called "the Cliff Young shuffle."

The way he was able to win—get this—when they were going through his backpack and his supplies to see if he was able to keep everything and to make sure all his stuff was in order, someone asked him, "Hey, where's all your gear for sleeping?"

And he said, "Sleeping? Oh, I didn't know you could sleep."

He ran, shuffled, for five days and fourteen hours. And today everyone does the Cliff Young shuffle, and nobody sleeps in ultramarathons.

Jesus is being that kind of example for us. The writer is saying, *Look what He did. Look how He did it. And look why He did it.*

Hebrews 12:2-3

...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. ³ Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The author says the reason He did it is ... well, let me read verses 2 and 3 again: “...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 and I may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

We fix our eyes on Jesus, and we look at what was motivating Him. And it says that it was the joy that was set before Him. What was the joy? It was pleasing the Father’s will. It was obeying the Father, and by doing that He was feeling the presence of His love and His approval. That’s what should be motivating us.

Also, many scholars say that this joy that He was setting His eyes upon was the joy knowing that you and I would become children of God through His obedience to the Father; that we get to be sons and daughters, but it’s going to have to be on the other side of that cross, after the resurrection.

So, He endured all that shame, all that pain, the path that was written for Him, the race that was designed by the Father for Him ... He did that because of His focus on the joy of pleasing the Father and knowing that you and I would be able to have intimacy with the triune God because of it.

One of the points of this passage is that we’re fixing our eyes on Him and that He is enduring suffering. This is bringing in the concept unique to Christianity, that God gets us. I mean, I love that campaign that’s out right now that’s on national TV as advertisements. The theme is that He gets us. And that’s the very point here, that Jesus is not asking us to do anything that He hasn’t done, that He hasn’t experienced and suffered. And because of that we connect with Him. Heaven and earth touch in the life of Jesus. When we find ourselves feeling afraid, Jesus says, *Yeah, I’ve been afraid*. Or when we’re righteously angry, Jesus says, *Yeah, I know*.

I've felt that. Have you ever felt like you're on top of the world and everybody loves you, but it's a fair-weather crowd? Jesus has felt that. Have you ever felt like two or three days later you're being betrayed by one of your faithful friends? Jesus gets that.

This is an inspiration to help us understand that the joy set before Jesus was what motivated Him, and His sonship did not get a pass. He did everything that we do and endured it to the very end.

And so, that's how we're supposed to be looking at our lives. It says our eyes should be fixed upon Jesus. That means studying a passage of Scripture in the gospels when maybe you're in an especially hard time. And you go to a passage where Jesus is having an especially hard time. And we fix our thoughts on Him. How does He think? What is He choosing to do? How could I run like Jesus? How does Jesus shuffle? How does that look? And how do I play this out? Because He gets you.

Hebrews 12:2b

...and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And the passage says that after the fulfillment of His obedience to the Father He ascends into heaven and sits down at the right side of the throne of God. And that is a place that symbolizes power and authority. That's what He is doing—He's ruling. He's doing two things in that: He is ruling, and second, He's praying for us. In chapter 7 a few chapters before it says, "Therefore, Jesus is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him"—here it comes—"since He always lives to intercede for me and for you."

Jesus is sitting next to the Father and speaking about you. Can you imagine that if Jesus had a wallet, your picture would be in that wallet. Think about that. He's talking to the Father about you. While you're hearing the cheers from the crowd, He's speaking to the Father to have the Spirit work in your life in a wonderful way. He has direct access to God Almighty.

Because of the Civil War there was a woman in the north that lost her husband and two sons. She only had a third son left. It's like *Saving Private Ryan*. And the crops were coming in and there was no one to harvest back at the farm. So, the remaining son went to his captain and asked for some time away so he could help bring in the crops so that his family wouldn't be completely bankrupt.

The captain said, “I’ll give you some time off to go to Washington. If Abraham Lincoln will let you go, then you can go.”

So, there was hope. He was naïve. So, he goes to Washington, D. C., and he’s walking up the stairs to the White House, and one of the guards stops him and says, “What do you think you’re doing? Where are you going?”

He said, “Well, I need to talk to the President so I can get some time furloughed so I can go help my mom. I’m the last remaining male.”

And the guard said, “We’re at war. That’s what happens. There are Rebels to defeat. You need to get back into the war. No, you can’t come in. The President doesn’t want to talk to you.”

Well, the young man, as you can imagine, was destroyed by that news. His hope, even though it was naïve, was still something that he was looking forward to—going to help his mom. So, as he’s crossing the street he begins weeping bitterly. And he sits down on this curb with his shoulders shaking. And a boy comes up next to him and says, “What’s the matter, mister? Are you okay?”

And he looks around and sees that no one is looking and thinks, “Why not?” He opens up his life to this young boy. And the boy says, “You know what I think? I think I might be able to help you. Hold my hand and come with me.”

And then he walks into the White House right past the guards into the President’s room. And there is Abraham Lincoln sitting behind this desk. And he says, “Hey, Tad, who’s your friend?” It was Tad Lincoln, and he had access to the President. He told his dad all that was going on in the soldier’s family, and Abraham Lincoln gave him the spring season off to go home and care for his mother.

That’s the access that we have. That’s what we get to enjoy with Jesus Christ. And that’s what gives me courage in times of weariness. The race—this life as a Christian—is not just a marathon. It’s an ultramarathon. And it’s suffering. Do not grow weary in doing good. Or, as Hebrews 12 says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let’s lay aside every weight, every sin that clings to us so closely. And let’s 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 and I would not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Well, on this very special Sunday it is my prayer that Grace would be filled with people who are revived and not fainthearted. Let's all finish well.

Thanks, Grace, for letting me come into your living room today.

Let me close in a word of prayer.

Lord Jesus, we are grateful that You would follow the Father's will, and You did that for the joy—the joy of seeing His pleasure. I'd ask that You would help us do that as well; that as we fixate our thoughts and our minds upon Jesus, not just as an example of how to run and finish well, but also what motivated You—the joy that You brought the Father. I'd ask that we would live that as well.

Lord, I'd ask that You would help speak to our conscience. May Your Spirit speak to our spirit about, maybe, a sin that is easily entangling us and tripping us up; or even something that is just neutral, just plain, but it's not good; that we would see ourselves as hungry professional athletes trying to make the very most out of this single life that You've given us.

Lord, thank You for allowing us to gather all over central Austin and still be at church this Sunday morning. I pray that Your protection be on our city. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you, everybody. We'll see you next week, and we'll get back to Romans 8.