

10 Good Reasons for not Giving Up part 1

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[0 : 0 0] Our pastor, Willie, has asked me to preach both this Sunday evening and next Sunday evening as well. And as it's still very early in the new year, for all of us, and possibly if you're university people, you've just come back for the beginning of term, I wanted to take at this stage a part of scripture which I hope will be invigorating and will put fresh heart into us, especially if we're feeling a bit grey and windswept and January-ish at this moment.

And that's why I've chosen Hebrews chapter 12. And if we want a title which sums up the message of this chapter, then we might pick ten good reasons for not giving up being a Christian.

I haven't actually counted precisely the number of reasons given us in this chapter for not giving up being a Christian. It might be eight, it might be eighteen, but the point is that this whole chapter is a call from God to keep going.

And it gives us a fistful of reasons for persevering. So if anyone in this building this evening is thinking about dropping out of the Christian life, and it would be surprising in a crowd as big as this if there weren't at least a few in that position, if anyone's thinking of dropping out, then I do trust that Hebrews 12 will powerfully dissuade you from doing that.

And likewise, there may be some here tonight who are not yet Christians. And perhaps Hebrews chapter 12 will persuade you or begin to persuade you that in Jesus Christ, Christians have found the one who alone makes sense of human life on planet Earth.

[1 : 3 5] So could we turn together to this passage? And if you've got one of our big hardback blue Bibles, you'll find it on page 1008. I want you to imagine for a moment that we've reached the year, approximately the year 2080.

Something like 70 or 80 years from now. Three or four generations down the track. And at that stage, the younger members of your family, therefore your grandchildren or great-grandchildren, are looking through an old family photograph album which dates from about 50 or 60 years previously.

And as they turn the pages over, there is a photograph of you, aged 80-something, with snow-white hair. And there you are, sitting in the garden on a summer's afternoon, smiling with your teacup in hand and looking at the roses in the garden.

And the caption underneath the photograph reads, So-and-so, that's your name, in the garden, Glasgow, June 2035. Rather an odd thought, isn't it?

A photograph of yourself, taken at the very end of your life, and being looked at by your grandchildren many years later. The caption there records the date and your name and the place.

[2 : 5 7] But what it doesn't record, what the caption can't record, is whether you were still actively following Christ during the very final years of your life. Captions don't record that kind of information.

But to you now, here in 2006, isn't that a very important question? Wouldn't you like to know now, that at the very end of your life, you were still following the Lord Jesus Christ?

We've all known people, I guess, who were active servants of Christ, apparently, for many years, and yet who came to a point in life when they stopped serving him. I knew of a parish vicar in Derby Diocese, who attended to his parish duties and did his work very faithfully for many years, until he retired.

But as soon as he'd retired, he never darkened a church door again. It's rather sobering to ask why that might have been so. Do you sometimes ask yourself, Will I still be a rejoicing and believing Christian at the very end of my life?

It is a question that we all need to ask. In fact, it's one of the questions raised by Hebrews 11 and 12. It may not be raised quite in that form, but the thrust of it is certainly raised.

[4 : 14] And you may remember how the author of this letter to the Hebrews is writing to Hebrew Christians, Jewish Christians, people from Jewish families who'd become Christians, who were then being persecuted by the Roman authorities, possibly during the reign of Nero as emperor in about 65 AD.

Now, at that stage in the Roman Empire, Christianity had become an illegal faith. So to remain as a Christian opened one up to persecution by the authorities, whereas to leave the church and return to the synagogue, if you've been a Jew, that might be an easy thing to do, to leave the church and go back to Judaism would exempt you from persecution because Judaism was still legal under Roman law.

And the author of Hebrews, throughout this great letter, is saying to his readers, Yes, it is tough being a Christian. It may bring real suffering because of all this persecution.

But keep going with the Lord Jesus, because if you leave Christ now, you won't go to heaven in the end. Perhaps you turn back with me a page to chapter 10 and verse 39.

Chapter 10, verse 39, because that verse focuses this question for us. Let me read the verse. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

[5 : 43] Now, the recipients of Hebrews, in the end, are going to fall into two groups. And you'll see the two groups mentioned in verse 39 there. Either those who shrink back from following Christ or those who continue to believe and are saved.

So the issue is to be destroyed or to be saved. It's a heaven and hell issue, as it always is. Just excuse me, I want to take a coughing break.

You know those moments when the news announces on BBC Radio 4, suddenly cough. Charlotte Green's very good at it. She says, excuse me. I just have one of those moments.

There we are. I'm okay now. So it's a heaven and hell issue to be destroyed by shrinking back from following Christ or to be saved. And it turns upon whether we continue with Christ or not.

And that's why it's so important to ask whether we're still going to be believers at the end of our lives on earth. Now, our plan, God willing, is to look at Hebrews 12 in two sessions. Today first, the first 13 verses, and then the second part of the chapter in a week's time.

[6 : 55] Now, the second half of the chapter, from verses 14 to 29, is full of strong and yet loving warnings from God. But this first half of the chapter is a passage of great encouragements.

And this is typical of the letter to the Hebrews. It moves from encouragements to warnings and then back to encouragements and then back to warnings again. And both the warnings and the encouragements proceed from the love of God.

It's because he loves Christians so much that he encourages us to keep going. And it's because he loves Christians so much that he warns us against falling away. So I do hope that our hearts will be warmed by the encouragements of verses 1 to 13 this evening.

We all of us need a lot of encouragement to keep going as Christians. Isn't that right? Isn't courage to persevere a rather feeble thing in most Christians?

I certainly speak for myself, that courage to keep going. It is so easy to be gutless and spineless as a Christian. And think of it, we folk are not even being persecuted.

[8 : 01] The fiercest suffering that most of us have had to face recently has been, I guess, having Great Aunt Ehrmintrude to stay over Christmas. That's about as tough as it gets in this country at the moment.

So how does God, not merely the author of Hebrews, but God himself, encourage us to persevere in these 13 verses? Now let's start by noticing the great metaphor which our author uses for the Christian life in verse 1 of chapter 12.

Have a look with me at the final few words of verse 1. The metaphor is not the metaphor of the hammock or the slumber-down quilt. It's the metaphor of the race. He says, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Now other parts of the Bible do emphasize the rest of being Christians. In fact, the earlier chapters of Hebrews have quite a lot to say about the final Sabbath rest of heaven, which is promised to those who persevere.

But the point is that those who rest then are those who keep going in the race now. Those who run on earth are those who will rest in heaven.

[9 : 16] Now why should the author of Hebrews pick this particular metaphor? Because he knows that it's going to be hard to keep going as being a Christian in the midst of a godless society.

When you're racing, this is the whole point of the metaphor, your lungs hurt, your throat hurts. Just think back to those races you did at school all those years ago. Your legs also get to the point where you hardly know how you're going to keep one leg going after the other.

So to finish the race requires determination. So this metaphor of the race dispels any illusions we might have that the Christian life is easy. I remember when I first went to church as a little boy.

My mother and father used to take me and my young sister to church regularly. And when we went to church when I was a youngster, I had no idea that being a Christian might involve guts and determination.

In fact, it seemed quite the opposite to me as a youngster of eight years old. It was school which required guts, athletics and football and particularly mathematics, maths.

[10 : 26] That was the arena of hardship as far as I was concerned. Whereas church seemed to be a haven of tranquility. At our parish church, at any church I guess, there was no maths and there was no fighting with other boys, which is what happened at school to me regularly.

And in our church, the stained glass windows... I went to a fairly small parish church in a little town near St. Albans in Hertfordshire. That's where I grew up. And the stained glass windows in our church pictured saints and prophets, quiet and serene men.

Or so it seemed to me as a youngster. Probably, as far as I could tell from looking at their pictures, they must have spent their days writing and reading in sunlit gardens that smelt of lilacs. That was church to me.

It's ironic that one of the stained glass windows in our little parish church near St. Albans pictured St. Albans, the first Christian to be martyred on British soil in about 300 AD.

I never stopped to consider, as an 80-year-old boy, what he must have gone through in the last 20 minutes of his life as Roman soldiers arrested him and put him to death because he was shielding a fugitive Christian pastor.

[11 : 42] So it's a race to keep going as a Christian. And that inevitably involves hardship and perseverance and an element of suffering. But let's look at the encouragements we're given in this passage to persevere right the way through to the finishing line.

So are you ready for the encouragements? Here we go, and I've got four. First, Old Testament believers ran the race and they finished it.

Now this is what chapter 11 has been all about. Just let your eye, or let me read chapter 11, part of it, from verse 32 onwards.

What more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received back their dead by resurrection. Now the author of Hebrews, in those few verses, mentions a few of the most notable Old Testament men of faith.

[12 : 59] And then he comments on how through faith, they achieved all manner of great feats. They conquered kingdoms, they shut the mouths of lions, that must be a reference to Daniel, perhaps other people, their weakness was turned into strength, and so on.

But then you get halfway through verse 35, and you realize that other people, equally faithful and equally persevering, end up at the rough end of the equation.

So picking it up halfway through verse 35, some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.

Others suffered mocking and flogging, even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. That doesn't happen to you more than once, does it? They were killed with the sword.

They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, of whom the world was not worthy, wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

[14 : 04] And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect.

So these are the Old Testament believers who ran the race and finished it. Now let me ask a question. You know how it is in the House of Commons when politicians from the opposing benches love to try to trip each other up and catch each other out, and we love to hear those soundbites.

We keep being told that it's different these days, since Mr. Cameron has become the leader of the Conservatives, that everyone's being terribly nice to each other in the House of Commons. But don't you like the old knockabout politics when somebody says something and then somebody knocks him down like that?

And one of the stock-in-trade jibes in these political slanging matches is for one person to say, but the party opposite is all promise and no performance.

Five years ago you promised us the earth and all you've given us is a miserable ten pence or whatever it is. Now here's my question. Does God deliver on his promises?

[15 : 16] If you think he does, nod your head, and if you think he doesn't, shake it. Let's just watch. Okay, you're sending me dizzy. That's enough. Okay, some are nodding and some are possibly shaking.

Now let me read Hebrews 11.39 again and tell me what you think, or think it anyway without saying it. Hebrews 11.39. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.

How was God letting them down? Was he behaving like an impotent politician? What the author of Hebrews means is that the big delivery, the ultimate great delivery of what God promises to believers is not made during our life on earth.

Oh yes, it's made finally. But the great promise of the gospel is the promise of heaven. So these Old Testament people of faith, some of them being sawn in two and so on, and we, reach the end of our life not yet having received the greatest thing that God has promised.

Look back to verse 37. The last thing that those believers saw on earth were stones and saws and swords. And the last things that you and I are likely to see on earth unless the Lord returns in the meantime are saline drips and oxygen masks and the magnolia colored walls of Ward 7.

[16 : 46] That's what it means to die in faith. Look back to verse 13 in chapter 11. These all died in faith not having received the things promised.

It's the same point and it's expressed in the same way. But having seen them and greeted them from afar and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. So the things promised were not received before death.

So to understand Hebrews we need to see that the whole book is tilted towards the future. The eternal future. We live the Christian life now in the light of the promise of heaven then.

Now friends don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that God gives us nothing before we die. Not at all. He gives us wonderful blessings for our encouragement and our joy in the here and now.

So for example he gives us the Holy Spirit as the down payment or deposit which guarantees that we shall reach heaven eventually. In fact it's by the power of the Spirit that any person is born again and begins to grow as a Christian.

[17 : 54] And then he gives us the love and the support of fellow Christians in the churches. And that is such a precious thing. Just look around here for a moment and see how precious is the provision God has made for us here and now.

And he gives us the Bible through which he progressively rearranges our mental furniture and transforms our thinking and our behavior.

And that's going on as we keep reading the Bible decade after decade. We are rearranged between the ears and in our lives. But we don't receive heaven while we're still on earth.

We have to wait for heaven. How different that is from the world. The world wants immediate joys. The Bible teaches that the greatest joy is one that we must wait for and wait for it patiently.

So the man or woman of faith is one who continues to wait patiently. And think of it. As Christians grow older our bodies grow weaker and very often our minds as well.

[18 : 52] But our sense of anticipation because we get to know the scriptures becomes stronger and more eager. So we're a little bit like the boy whose morning slumbers are broken by the smell of frying bacon drifting up the stairs and under the bedroom door.

That boy wakes up and he sniffs the air and he has eager anticipations. And in the same way the Christian eagerly anticipates the enjoyment of everything that God has promised but much of which we shall not receive this side of the grave.

Now verse 1 in chapter 12 tells us that there is a very practical consequence of all this. Here's verse 1 again. 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.

Now in verse 1 these Old Testament believers are described as witnesses. Witnesses. Not in the sense that they in heaven are looking down upon us and witnessing our efforts and struggles in the marathon down here.

But rather in the sense that their example of perseverance under duress bears witness to the fact that it is possible to live a life of faith like theirs.

[20 : 15] So they're saying to us we did it in our day so you can do it in your day. Some of us were stoned and sawn in two but we still persevered and therefore you can do it now.

So here's the practical consequence. Since we are surrounded by this great host of witnesses to the life of faith and perseverance let us let us what?

Now notice the vigor and energy of the verbs that are used here. Let us lay aside or throw off every weight and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Don't you love the strenuousness of those verbs? There is something full-blooded about the Christian life as the New Testament teaches it. Throw off everything that hinders and the sin the sin that clings so closely.

Now friends you know you know the things which hinder you from running the race. You know the sin that threatens to entangle you. I haven't got to spell out for you what are your particular sins and hindrances and temptations.

[21 : 18] You know them much better than I do. The sins and hindrances that affect one person are not the same as those that affect another. But whatever they are our author is saying to each of us throw them off.

It's a very strong verb. Expel them he's saying. Eject them. It's not the gentle action of slowly dropping them into the dustbin because you might be tempted to pick them out of the dustbin again.

No. It's the powerful action of throwing them out entirely. Have no further truck with them and having got rid of these excess baggage weights we will then be in a position to run the race with perseverance and without being hindered.

So there's the first point. Old Testament believers ran the race and finished it in their day. Therefore we can in our day. That's the implication. It is a great encouragement to think of those men and women of faith who ran the race before Christ and you can do it too.

That's what they're saying to us. Now point number two encouragement number two Jesus finished the race. This is what verses two and three are about.

[22 : 27] these two verses are telling us to look to Jesus as the example of perseverance under suffering. Now let me just say this before I read these two verses out loud.

There are aspects of Jesus' life which are not an example to us in the sense that we can't imitate them and we're not intended to.

So for example you and I cannot die a sin bearing death as Jesus did. You and I cannot bestow the Holy Spirit on other people as Jesus does.

You and I cannot promise eternal forgiveness or pronounce eternal forgiveness on others in the way that Jesus can. You and I can't walk on the water or feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.

There are certain things which he did or does which we cannot do and we were never meant to do. But verses two and three here in Hebrews twelve describe a way in which we are intended to follow Jesus' example and that is his willingness to endure difficulty.

[23 : 35] So let me read these two verses. 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.

So why are we to look to Jesus, to fix our eyes upon him or to consider him? So that, end of verse three, we will not grow weary and lose heart and drop out of the great race.

It's to keep us up and running that we are to keep our eyes on him. Somebody once said, for each look within, take ten looks at him. Our thoughts naturally will be curved in upon ourselves.

That's the way sinful human beings are. So that's good advice. For each look within, take ten looks at him. Now let me point out two aspects of verse two which will help us to get the right perspective on all this.

First, Jesus focused on the final goal rather than on the painful route to it. There it is in the middle of verse two.

[24 : 43] Who for the joy set before him endured the cross. he was looking to the joy, the joy of being reunited with his father in heaven. It was fixing his thoughts on the goal which enabled him to endure the pain in the middle.

Let me give a very trivial illustration. You know how in some households where there are teenagers there comes a point in the spring and early summer when exams are looming and everyone gets a bit gloomy.

Do you know that feeling? Parents, you certainly do if you've seen your children go through it. It gets to about March and April and May and the children wander around the house with a very pained expression on their face.

They've been up in their room studying away and they come down to make a cup of tea and they look gruesome. And you say to them, are you all right sweetheart? Yuck, no I'm not. But after the pain, after the exams are all over, it's the summer holidays isn't it?

Fishing, barbecues, the south of France. The joys are just round the corner. Now that's a trivial illustration.

[25 : 49] On a much, much more serious level, Jesus fixed his eye on the joy that was set before him, the joy of being reunited with the father. And that is why he was able to endure the cross, according to this verse.

So as we follow his example, let's keep our eyes on the final goal, which is heaven. And the joy of being with father and son and with all those others, the angels and the redeemed.

And that will help us to keep running as we get to the more uphill parts of the marathon. So Jesus focused on the final goal rather than on the painful route to it.

And then secondly, we're still in verse 2, Jesus despised the shame of the cross. He despised it, scorned it. And that attitude too is an example for us to follow.

Think of it, in Jesus' day, crucifixion was a form of capital punishment reserved for sub-men, men thought to be hardly human, beasts.

[26 : 50] Roman law did not allow Roman citizens to be crucified. That would have been an insult to the dignity of Rome. So crucifixion was kept for those who were only fit to be spat at.

It was utterly degrading and shameful. Just think of it. You were stuck up on this great big pole high above the earth without a stitch of clothing anywhere. And after a few hours of hanging there, you would have been drenched in blood and sweat and the spit of onlookers.

When we look at Christian art, pictorial representations of the crucifixion, they usually conceal the real horror of what it was like. It was the essence of shame.

It was dreadful. But, verse 2, Jesus despised and scorned the shame. In other words, he considered it was worth being degraded in the eyes of the world so as to be true to God.

He valued God's opinion more than the world's opinion. And it can be a shameful thing in the eyes of the world to be an evangelical Christian. It will never be shameful to belong to a worldly church.

[28 : 03] So, for example, where a church is seen to be a patron of the arts, or a guardian of fine ecclesiastical architecture, or a part of the world of philosophical debate, or perhaps as part of the pageantry of the nation, colour and splendour and big events and so on.

Where a church is like that, it will generally be applauded by the world. But New Testament Christianity, which says nothing about patronage of the arts, and knows no ecclesiastical splendour, and has no alliances with universities or wealth or power, but rather preaches a crucified saviour, that kind of Christianity will always be looked at askance by the world.

Let me try and focus it like this. I wonder if you'd be prepared to take a placard or a sandwich board with a very simple and hard-hitting Bible text on it and stand out there in Buchanan Street holding it up for a couple of hours, on a busy Saturday morning with thousands of people going past you.

Would you do that? Just think of yourself doing it in the midst of sandwich boards with something like we preach Christ crucified or some hard-hitting text like that. Now you might ask a question about the evangelistic effectiveness of doing something like that, but that's not the question I'm asking.

I'm asking a question about shame. Just think of yourself standing out there in the street and you see a friend of yours approaching, a friend who's not expecting to see you there. And as your friend approaches and recognizes you and sees what you're wearing, suddenly a look of horror crosses her face and she pretends she hasn't seen you and she disappears pretty rapidly into a shop.

[29 : 47] in the eyes of the world, it's a shameful thing to be associated with simple Bible gospel Christianity.

And yet, holding up a placard which proclaims salvation through Christ isn't half as shameful as the public humiliation that Jesus went through.

But he despised the shame of the cross because he was more concerned to please his father than to gain the good opinion of the world. So friends, there's our second great encouragement to keep running the race.

Jesus finished it. Verse 3, consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted.

Now third, the hard discipline of running the race is a demonstration of God's love for us. A demonstration of God's love for us.

[30 : 48] This is what verses 4 to 11 are all about. And they are a real surprise. You might sum up this paragraph by saying that the hardships we sometimes endure are evidence that God loves us very much.

Loves us so much that he is taking the trouble to train us. Look with me at the first half of verse 7 here. It is for discipline that you have to endure.

God is treating you as sons, children, members of the family. And that verse is picking up the quotation from the book of Proverbs given in verses 5 and 6.

Verse 6, the Lord disciplines whom? The one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives. And verse 8, if you are left without discipline in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.

So the hardships we go through are evidence of true sonship, truly belonging to the family, evidence that God loves us and is training us to know his ways and to understand them better.

[31 : 55] Now I say this is a real surprise to us because our natural reaction, our strong natural reaction to tough times is to think that God has left us and doesn't love us.

or even that he may be punishing us because he dislikes us. What have I done to deserve this? That's our natural way of looking at hard times. But the power of the Bible is that it roots out our natural way of looking at things and teaches us to understand the truth about hardships.

God uses the tough passages in our lives to train us to be more truly members of his family, more truly his sons and daughters. Let me just give a practical example of this.

I have a good friend, an American, called Tom Oates and I sometimes go over and stay with him and his family. Now Tom is a man in his late 50s now.

He's a delightful and grown up Christian and he's currently the pastor of a fairly small church on the east coast of America near New York. However, about 12 or 14 years ago, the church that he was then pastoring in Massachusetts ejected him from his position as their rector.

[33 : 09] It was an Episcopal church. They kicked him out and the reason why this happened was that they didn't want the biblical gospel that he was preaching week by week.

They were a worldly church and they didn't want serious evangelism. They wanted to tolerate things like marital indiscipline and deviant sexual behavior and various other things which their pastor Tom was not prepared to go along with.

So the church council, the equivalent of the Kirk session, known as the vestry, I'm afraid to say backed by the bishop as well, kicked him out. Now you can imagine that he and his wife had to endure great opposition from within their congregation for some years before the whole thing came to a head and led to his being expelled.

Now a man untrained by Hebrews 12 might have said if God can allow all this pain to happen to me I'm dropping out of the race.

I can't go on being a Christian if I have to endure such hardship and suffering. And yet this Tom today far from being an embittered ex-Christian is a gracious and fine pastor doing an excellent job of leading and loving his congregation.

[34 : 25] In the words of verse 6 he knows that the Lord disciplines the one that he loves. And why does God do this? Well the reason is given us halfway through verse 10.

He disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness. So he puts us through painful episodes in life so that we should share something of his own nature, his holiness, so as to enlarge the common ground that he and we share.

Now the world's view of God will always be that he owes it to us to give us a pleasant and pain free life. But just imagine yourself arriving at the gates of heaven after a pleasant and pain free life, a life that has known no real pain, and then meeting Jesus who will still have the marks of the cross upon him, visible for all to see.

There wouldn't be much to talk about would there with him? There wouldn't be a lot of common ground. But if we have had to endure hardship, we'll be able to look up into his face with a little bit more understanding and appreciation.

Again to give a simple illustration, when a woman has just lost her husband, her children and her grandchildren will rally around and do their very best to help her and love her and support her.

[35 : 50] But when a good friend comes to see her who is also a widow, who's been through the same thing, there is a real level of shared understanding. So when the visitor comes to her friend and flings her arms around her newly widowed friend, she then says to her, my dear, I know what it's like.

And she does. And in the same way, we shan't grow deeply acquainted with the man of sorrows if we know nothing of sorrows. Some of the sufferings that we have to endure are like my friend Tom's sufferings for the sake of the gospel.

Others come to us simply because we live in a broken and bruised world and we're part of it. But let's never mistake God's motives in allowing us to go through these things.

Verse 10 says he disciplines us for our good so that we may share his holiness. And the very next words in verse 11 have such a delightful sense of reality about them.

The author says, for the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant. So our author is not saying that pain is not painful. He's saying it is painful. It hurts.

[37 : 05] But, as the verse goes on, later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. So, friends, whatever hardships we may have had to go through, whatever hardships we may be facing at this very moment, and I'm sure many of you are, let's allow God to train our way of understanding them and thinking about them.

They are not evidence of his absence from us or of his antagonism towards us, but rather of his love and his desire, his determination that we should share his holiness.

They are the father's discipline, training the son or the daughter that he loves. Well, we've seen so far, first, Old Testament believers ran this race and they finished it, and that's a great encouragement to us to keep going.

Secondly, Jesus finished it, and he's our great example, so we fix our eyes on him. And thirdly, the discipline of running the race is a demonstration of how much God loves us.

Now, fourth and last, and very briefly, even the weak and feeble can finish this race. Look at verse 12. Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.

[38 : 25] Perhaps we thought in those first 11 verses that the author was just writing to great Christian athletes. You know the sort of people, people with bulging spiritual biceps, the great shot putters of the Christian world with thighs like thunder.

Well, he's not. He's writing to you and me, the people who know that our arms are feeble and our knees are weak and knocking. He's saying to us, come on, little ones, keep going.

You can finish the race too. And we can. We need his help constantly, and we need each other's help, and that's why he gives us one another. But the finishing line is not beyond our reach.

And all this means that when you do finally get to the last chapter of life on earth, and as you look for the very last time through drooping eyelids at the saline drip and the vase of bronze chrysanthemums and the magnolia walls of Ward 7, you are still a believer.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

[39 : 48] The Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives. 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. Our dear Heavenly Father, we are conscious that this is a great passage full of strength and full of powerful reasons for our perseverance. We do tell you, we tell you straight off that we are weak and feeble. That's the way we feel. And indeed, that's the way we are.

But we know that by your grace and goodness, we are able to finish the race as we look to Jesus and think of him fixing his eyes upon the final goal rather than upon the painful path to it. So please be our helper. And our prayer is that our lives, the lives of all of us here, will be filled with fresh joy as we run this race, as we lay aside and throw out everything that hinders and entangles us. And we pray that the Lord Jesus will himself fill our vision more and more. And we ask it to the glory and honor of his great name.

Amen.