

3k - God's Severe Mercy

Read Hebrews 12



Twenty-six miles is a long way to go. You've been running for over two hours; your heart is pounding, your chest is heaving, your body aches, and your pace begins to slacken. How nice it would be to quit, to lie down and rest, to take it easy. You begin to wonder whether the race is really worth all the effort.

The Hebrew believers wondered that about Christianity. Within the Jewish community their lives had been tranquil and carefree. However, now as Christians they were ridiculed, rejected, persecuted—and ready to give up. Like an experienced trainer, the author encourages them to keep on running. He helps them and us to understand why hardship can be God's severe mercy.

1. What do athletic training and parental discipline have in common?

In both areas the discipline must:

- a. have a clear goal in mind
- b. take place before the "big event"
- c. occur on a daily basis for years; become a habit
- d. be both positive and negative
- e. be holistic; involving body mind and spirit
- f. teach how to be part of a team, that it takes all together to succeed
- g. teach the necessity of staying out of trouble
- h. require deep, systematic research; it can't be ad hoc and be successful

2. Read Hebrews 12:1-13. In what ways is the Christian life like a marathon (Hebrews 12:1-4)?

The race. (v.1) The word "race" used here (agon) is the word from which we derive our English word "agonize". Anyone who has run any long distance race knows the agony referred to. You may do everything right: train hard, eat right, and obey your coaches. You may do everything right and STILL struggle with the agony of the race. Those who fail to invest the time and effort before the race will certainly fail.

As with any footrace, it doesn't matter how fast you start if you don't finish. I believe that the author of Hebrews was the apostle Paul and it was he who said,

- [2 Timothy 4:7 HCSB](#) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

The goal of the race must not be understood to be the attainment of heaven and only those who win get in. What every original reader understood was that one did not get to compete unless they were already a citizen. Our citizenship in heaven is settled the moment we accept Jesus as our Savior. Then the race to inculcate more and more of Him into our lives begins. Salvation and imputed righteousness achieved, the race for practical holiness begins.

3. How can the "great cloud of witnesses" in the stadium (those described in Hebrews 11) motivate us to keep on running?

When we are struggling in our walk we should turn to Hebrews 11.

When we “grow weary in well doing” we need to listen to Noah tell us, “How long do you say you’ve been waiting? It took me 120 years to build the ark, and it was never easy. People ridiculed me and said, ‘Are you sure you really heard God? Maybe you just heard someone else.’ I tried to warn them of the judgment that was coming, but no one would listen. So, I kept on building, and when the floods came the ark became the vehicle of our salvation. You need to keep on, keeping on, too.”

When we become discouraged, our father Abraham is likely whispering in our ear. “Listen, if you follow God, the world will probably think you’re crazy because God’s ways are not their ways. However, listen carefully to what He tells you, follow in His steps, be true to His will and it will all work out.”

Listen to Joseph saying, “Look, it doesn’t take much to be faithful when things are going your way. However, when you are at the bottom, and everything seems to be falling apart, make sure that you’re still faithful.”

Each story has something to offer. Each life experience should encourage us in our personal walk. There is a tremendous potential available in just that one chapter of the Bible. I believe we could study it for years and not fully plumb its depths.

4. What kinds of things can hinder or entangle us as Christians?

Lay aside the weight. (v.1) The “weight” (onkos) is not intrinsically evil. It is simply something which weighs us down, diverts our attention, saps our strength, or dampens our enthusiasm for the things of God. How terrible that most people spend most of their time and energy on trifles while setting God aside. As the Puritan preacher Richard Baxter put it, “He who is all seems to them as nothing, and that which is nothing seems to them as good as all.”

I have a huge winter topcoat that extends all the way down to my calves. It is very thick and heavy. It’s great to wear when I need to walk around in the cold but it would be terrible to wear in a race! The long coat would entangle my legs. The weight would bear down, causing my lungs to burn and my heart to pound – awful! We need to realize that everything that hinders our race must be set aside. It’s just making life more difficult than it needs to be.

We have the unfortunate capacity of turning nearly anything into sin. A mother should love her children but if that love becomes so overwhelming that she fails to deal with their sin, mother-love just became an entrapping weight. We must put away the human disposition for turning these things into temptations.

5. Jesus has already completed the race. How can fixing our eyes on him keep us from growing weary and losing heart?

Keeping our eyes on Jesus. (v.2) The word “looking” comes from a Greek word (aphorao) that has the idea of concentrating one’s gaze.

In much the same way a coach will tell his runners, “When the gun sounds, start running as hard as you can. Don’t look back. Don’t look around. Keep your eyes on the finish line and keep on running.” Every time the runner glances sideways, at the crowd, at another runner, he slows down a little. His mind is not wholly focused on the action and his body consequently reflects the divided attention.

We are to deliberately lift our eyes from those things which might distract us and focus with utter concentration on Jesus. Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.”¹ If we want to see the Father we must look at the Son.² We are to make our attitude that of Christ Jesus.³ We must do this until we too can say,

¹ Colossians 1:15

² John 14:8-9

³ Philippians 2:5

- [Galatians 2:19b-20a HCSB](#) ...I have been crucified with Christ; and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...

Source. (v.2) The term here is “archegos”, literally “pioneer”. Jesus is the initiator of our faith.

Consider. (v.3) When we are asked to “consider” Jesus in verse three it means to make a careful reckoning by comparing. The reader is asked to compare their suffering and hardships with His. The sufferings of Christ’s followers, however severe they may be, are always incomparably light when weighted against the suffering of the Master Himself. Jesus was opposed. He was persecuted. He was mocked. Yet, He stayed the course, ran the race and paid the price. So, when we get weary we need to “keep our eyes on” and “consider” Him.

6. In Hebrews 12:5-13, the imagery changes from a race to a family. What "word of encouragement" does the Father give us about hardships in life (Hebrews 12:5-7)?

- When we face hardships we don’t have to face them alone. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)
- When we face hardships they don’t have to be meaningless.
- When we face hardships we can trust the counsel of our heavenly Father.
- When we face hardships that are not the natural consequence of our own sins, we should be encouraged that our Father thinks we are ready to step up to the next level and is investing in us.

As James said,

- [James 1:2-4 HCSB](#) Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, (3) knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (4) But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

7. We often want our lives to be free from hardship or difficulty. How does Hebrews 12:8 challenge such an attitude?

If without discipline...you are illegitimate. (v.8) Chrysostom was much closer to the Greek culture that formed the context of this writing than we are. He explained that Roman fathers did not concern themselves with the education or advancement of their bastards. He said, *“Since, then, not to be chastised is a mark of bastardy, we ought to rejoice in chastisement, as a mark of our genuine sonship.”*

The bastard may enjoy the fact that he does not have to go to school, is not subject to the harsh disciplines of the household, and does not get spanked. Yet, he is not provided for either and his lack of discipline and education means he has no real future.

8. How does the discipline of our human fathers compare with God's discipline (Hebrews 12:9-10)?

We respected them. (v.9) Usually our punishment from our parents was short and deserved. In contrast, sometimes God’s discipline is long lasting and perhaps in our own minds undeserved. All of us understand being punished for doing wrong but it is very difficult for our yetzer hara to accept that discipline for discipline’s sake is for our own good.

Unfortunately, we have plenty of examples of undisciplined children. We see homes in which the children are in control, and schools in which the children are in control. If God were to allow us to go undisciplined, eventually we would be in control, and then we would be doomed.

He does it for our benefit. (v. 10) When I was in the Marines I didn’t particularly enjoy getting up at “zero dark hundred” to do PT in the cold wet grass, run five miles, do a surf

swim, and then have to do twenty pull-ups (last one pulling all the way up and flipping myself over the bar) in order to earn the right to eat breakfast. I didn't necessarily enjoy the process. Nevertheless, as a warrior, I recognized the benefits. I realized that it would enable me to survive what would likely kill most other men. So I endured. I disciplined myself to accept discipline.

If we can do this with human, sinful, often wicked humans, who at their best are limited in their knowledge, how much more should we submit to omniscient, perfect, and holy God? Paul said in

- [1 Corinthians 11:32 HCSB](#) but when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord, so that we may not be condemned with the world. God is not trying to harm us. He is trying to save us.

9. If we endure God's discipline now, how will our lives be different later on (Hebrews 12:11-13)?

[Hebrews 12:11-13 HCSB](#) No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (12) Therefore strengthen your tired hands and weakened knees, (13) and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but healed instead.

Seems. (v.11) It only "seems" so to those whose judgment may be clouded by their pain. However, when the difficulty fades, a new clarity emerges and we see the truth that was staring us in the face the whole time: God is on our side. He loves us, cherishes us and is constantly seeking our good.

Fruit of peace and righteousness. (v.11) This is the same fruit that comes when we can

- [Philippians 1:10-11 HCSB](#) ... determine what really matters and can be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, (11) filled with the fruit of righteousness that *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Seeing as we are the branches and He is the vine, that fruit can only come through Christ.

- [John 15:5 HCSB](#) "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me.
- [2 Corinthians 9:10-11 HCSB](#) (10) Now the One who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will provide and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness, (11) as you are enriched in every way for all generosity, which produces thanksgiving to God through us.

Isaiah tells us

- [Isaiah 32:17 HCSB](#) The result of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quiet confidence forever.

If we will only endure life's hardships without compromising our relationship with the Giver of Life, following the Good Shepherd up the steep, rocky paths, we will soon find ourselves in lush green pastures, enjoying the quiet peace of the Lord's provision and care.

10. Read Hebrews 12:14-29. What factors can lead us, like Esau, to miss out on God's blessing (Hebrews 12:14-17)?

[Hebrews 12:16-17 HCSB](#) And see that there isn't any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for one meal. (17) For you know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected because he didn't find any opportunity for repentance, though he sought it with tears.

Immoral. (v. 16) Immorality is very similar in nature to gluttony, Esau's particular sin. It is allowing a natural desire to take such prominence in our lives that it overrides common sense and good judgment.

Irreverent. (v. 16) He despised his birthright. He didn't sufficiently value it. He was careless with it. Too many Christians today hold a similar attitude toward grace. Esau took his father's blessing so lightly that we became a mocker.

- **Genesis 25:32 HCSB** "Look," said Esau, "I'm about to die, so what good is a birthright to me?"

Obviously, he ran no risk of dying of starvation within the boundaries of his father's property. The tone was facetious, joking. What we joke about we can sometimes come to despise. We mustn't treat the sacrifice of the Lord, His kingship and the gifts He has given to His people as something to be scorned and mocked. That is why believers are enjoined to be "sober-minded" (1 Thessalonians 5:6, 8; 1 Peter 5:8).

11. Looking at Hebrews 12:18-24, describe in your own words the vivid differences between Mount Sinai (symbol of the Old Covenant) and Mount Zion (our heavenly home).

Mount Sinai	Mount Zion
Touchable	only accessible through Christ
Blazing fire	freedom from hell fire
Darkness, gloom	everlasting light
Storm	Peace
Trumpet warning	Triumphant Trumpet calling us home
Sound of words	Physical presence of the Messiah
Death	Life
Terror	Festivity (v.22b)
Jesus as Judge	Jesus as Mediator of a New Covenant

12. In light of the glorious destiny of the righteous, why is it perilous to refuse to listen to God's encouragement and warning in this chapter (Hebrews 12:25-27)?

Hebrews 12:25-27 HCSB See that you do not reject the One who speaks; for if they did not escape when they rejected Him who warned them on earth, even less will we if we turn away from Him who warns us from heaven. (26) His voice shook the earth at that time, but now He has promised, **Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also heaven.** (27) Now this expression, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what is not shaken might remain.

Hebrews 3:12-13 HCSB Watch out, brothers, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that departs from the living God. (13) But encourage each other daily, while it is still called **today**, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception.

Proverbs 1:24-33 HCSB Since I called out and you refused, extended my hand and no one paid attention, (25) since you neglected all my counsel and did not accept my correction, (26) I, in turn, will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when terror strikes you, (27) when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when trouble and stress overcome you. (28) Then they will call me, but I won't answer; they will search for me, but won't find me. (29) Because they hated knowledge, didn't choose to fear the LORD, (30) were not interested in my counsel, and rejected all my correction, (31) they will eat the fruit of their way and be glutted with their own schemes. (32) For the waywardness of the inexperienced will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them. (33) But whoever listens to me will live securely and be free from the fear of danger."

Jeremiah 11:10-11 HCSB They have returned to the sins of their ancestors who refused to obey My words and have followed other gods to worship them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah broke My covenant I made with their ancestors. (11) "Therefore, this is what the LORD says: I am about to bring on them disaster that they cannot escape. They will cry out to Me, but I will not hear them.

Ezekiel 5:5-9 HCSB "This is what the Lord GOD says: I have set this Jerusalem in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. (6) But she has rebelled against My ordinances with more wickedness than the nations, and against My statutes more than the countries that surround her. For her people have rejected My ordinances and have not walked in My statutes. (7) "Therefore, this is what the Lord GOD says: Because you have been more insubordinate than the nations around you--you have not walked in My statutes or kept My ordinances; you have not even kept the ordinances of the nations around you-- (8) therefore, this is what the Lord GOD says: See, I am against you, *Jerusalem*, and I will execute judgments within you in the sight of the nations. (9) Because of all your abominations, I will do to you what I have never done before and what I will never do again.

13. Look back over the whole chapter. What have you learned about how discipline can be God's severe mercy?

14. Our God is not only a loving Father but also a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28-29). Take time now to thank and worship him with reverence and awe.