

# Hebrews 12:1–13 // “The 4 Helps to Faith” // *Christ is Better*, #11

---

**Small group announcement:** We are going to look at the main objections people have to believing the Christian message and how Jesus addressed each of them. This is, in my opinion, going to be a great series for you to reach people and build community through. Right now just under 50% of the people who come here every week are in community. That's not including your friends who don't have a church home. But it's in community where something goes from a sermon point to a life change moment. That's why we say discipleship happens in relationships. So here's what I want to suggest. I want you to consider hosting a short-term small group with your friends. The series will be 7 weeks. What if you hosted a group of friends in your home, apartment, dorm room, for 7 weeks? These are people you know. Some may be friends here at the Summit with you that are a part of that unconnected 50%. Maybe its people in your neighborhood or workplace. Hopefully its both! We'll give you the material which will include video teaching from me, and questions with yes, the answers in the back. We will train you. August 20th at our brier creek campus. Details in your worship guide. "

**Hebrews 12:** What do you consider to be the most valuable thing in your life? Your most valuable personal quality. If you had to finish this sentence, “*The* is the most important thing that I possess is,” what would it be? According to the writer of Hebrews, the most valuable thing in your life is faith.

Faith is the belief that what God has revealed about Himself in the Bible is true, and that following Him is worth it. Without it, the writer says, you'll never please God, because you'll never go all the

way with Jesus; you'll never fully commit yourself to the mission; you won't obey him in the hard areas; you'll never make it through dark chapters in your life.

Remember that the people to whom the author of Hebrews is writing are struggling because the Christian life has gotten hard for them—they are being persecuted; they have difficult questions; unanswered prayers. Some of them are barely hanging on.

So in chapter 12 he offers them 4 helps to faith in difficult times. Look at how he sets it up. [12:1] **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, this is an illustration we can all identify with right now, right?
  - How many of you are pretty avid viewers of the Olympics?
  - I've gotten into it a lot more this year than I have in the past, to my detriment. I've had a particularly busy week but I've still been up every night until midnight yelling at the TV for a bunch of sports I'd never, ever watch under normal circumstances.
  - Like women's water polo. Or that game with the little disc they push and scrub as it goes... who said, “That's a sport!”?
- He says that the Christian life is like a marathon. The word for race = **agon** (where we get the word “agony.”)
  - That was a word they used to refer to the pentathlon, and that might have been what Paul was thinking about here.
  - The pentathlon was a 5-event sporting match that ended with a Greco-Roman boxing match. After you ran and swam you'd square off in the ring. The fighters wore these leather gloves that would protect their hands but disfigure the other's face. It was an *agonizing* event.

- Imagine that at the end of the Men’s Freestyle Relay. Kind of would have liked to have seen that. See Michael Phelps go over and just brawl with that French guy, Yannick Agnel.
- Point is: the Christian life is hard, and for many of you, this is right where you are. You are in a difficult chapter. You thought the Christian life was supposed to be all warm-fuzzies and abundant life and that’s just not what you feel like right now!

So...

#### 4 motivations to keep going

##### 1. Consider the witnesses

- The first word in vs. 1 is “therefore.”
  - Every pastor I’ve ever heard always makes this joke when he sees the word “therefore,” and he always acts like he’s the one that made it up, that any time you see the word “therefore” in the Bible you ought to always look and see what it is... “there for.” It points you backwards.
  - In this case, backwards to what? **To the list of Hebrews 11.** He points to all these people who risked it all on God and His promises.
  - He summarizes the list this way **(11:32)**... through faith some of them *“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... others (however) suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword.”* **(11:32–40)**
- Which means that some of them, through faith, saw God do these incredibly powerful things; but other times, they died without receiving any earthly validation for their faith. THEY PRAYED THE SAME PRAYERS... but God didn’t show up (or at least it seemed so)
  - And I told you, *“If you require earthly validation of your faith you won’t make it.”* And I really need you to think about that.
- These were people just like you. We tend to read these stories and think these were incredible men and women of faith that had everything all figured out. They had no doubts; had all their questions answered.
  - Have you ever read the Bible? Job is called in the Old Testament was one of the 3 greatest men of faith that ever lived, yet, he ends the book of Job basically saying *“God, this makes no sense. I don’t understand... why?”*
  - And God’s answer to him is basically, “Uhhh... excuse me, Job... until you create your own universe, from scratch, you’re probably not in a place to question me. If you are still stumped by quantum physics don’t suspect that you can master the internal workings of my infinite mind.”
  - Job died without ever really understanding what God had been up to on earth.
  - What God did give him was a glimpse of His steadfast love and infinite power.
  - He got revelation, not explanation. That’s what we get!
  - Our experience, said the church father Anselm, is faith seeking understanding. We want to understand, and God gives us flashes of understanding sometimes, but even the best and smartest of us have unanswered questions.
- These OT saints are like people in a marathon who started before us, and now stand along the sides as we run, telling us, *“Keep going. It’s worth it! You’ll make it!”*
  - **White water rafting in mountains of WV:** you could look down and see the boats at the bottom. Clearly they can make it. (In my case, ILLUSTRATION DOESN’T WORK, BUT STILL) These witnesses are like that.
  - **They stand there saying,** I know it doesn’t make sense now. It didn’t to us either! But you can see now that in all our trials God was working even when we didn’t understand, bringing something out of us far beyond

what we could see—He was bringing Christ to earth through us! (We couldn't see it, but you can see it now) We stand as witnesses to you that God is working in your pain, now, just like He was in ours, bringing to pass a greater plan than you realize!

OK, 2<sup>nd</sup> help to faith, verse 2:

**(2. Fix your eyes on Jesus)** *In Greek, "look" is "look away!" As in, look at off in the distance.<sup>1</sup> It's not something you look at him doing now, but you are looking out of your pain and out of your darkness to 2 things about him.*

The first is **a. His promise:** *"looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter (or, 'completer') of our faith," (vs. 2)*

- He's the author and the completer. Jesus is the one who started this process, and He's the one who will finish it.
- The cross shows you how much He has invested in you.
  - When you make a real estate deal, you put down **earnest money**. And they want it to be enough that you wouldn't walk away from the deal; you'd leave too much behind.
  - Jesus has invested His blood in you! He's got more invested in your life than you do. He will complete the process.
- When you give up on yourself, God won't! The cross shows you how committed He is to seeing it through.
- That takes the pressure off of me. What sermon am I going to preach this weekend that's got to change people's lives.
- It takes the pressure off of you. "How am I ever going to change my life?" You don't have to! He is the founder and perfecter. In a sense, you are being asked to run a race that has already been won! So of course you can get up. He has already provided the assurance of victory and all the power to get there!

- WHEN YOU FIRST START WALKING WITH GOD, IT SEEMS LIKE YOU WERE MAKING THE DECISIONS...
- IT WASN'T YOUR IDEA!
- **Spurgeon:** *"Listen to the voice of the Lord speak, I will help you. It is a small thing for me, your God, to help you. Consider what I have already done. What? Not help you! I bought you with My blood. What? not help you! I died for you. Since I have done the greater, will I not do the less?"* God, who is infinite in power, who brought Jesus' dead, lifeless back from the grave, is at work in you and he can bring your life back from the ashes.

Let's skip vs. 2 and save that one for the end.

The second is [3] *"Looking unto Jesus... consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*

- **b. His experience:** consider the hostility against him.
  - Sometimes I listen to these critiques of us. We're ignorant because we believe that a personal, intelligent God created and rules the world. **Christopher Hitchens says** he thinks *"religion should be treated with ridicule, hatred and contempt."*<sup>2</sup> Sam Harris says that *"the problem with (Christianity) is that it allows people to believe en masse what only idiots or lunatics could believe in isolation."*<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins says that we are guilty of child abuse; that what we teach our children is worse than sexual abuse and we ought to have our children taken away from us. Or I read some editorial in the NYT that says we are "hateful people" because we believe what God says about right and wrong.
  - *Or I read what people blog about me.* And I think, "Am I doing something wrong? Are we doing something wrong?" Do we really seem that ignorant

---

<sup>1</sup> Aphorao: EDNT 1.183

<sup>2</sup> <http://conservativetimes.org/?p=3826>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/16593.Sam\\_Harris](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/16593.Sam_Harris)

and hateful? And there's always things we can critique. A lot of times there is truth in even unfair criticism.

- But I often remember the words of Jesus in John 16, *"They hated me; they'll hate you, too. In fact, you should be wary when all men speak well of you."*
  - Jesus' crucifixion was a joint project between the government officials (Pilate), the religious authorities (Pharisees), the educated elite (those were the Sadducees); and the mainstream media (a combo of the above). By the political right *and* left. We can expect the same kind of treatment.
- ***In fact, it is when you are not getting the reaction Jesus got that you are doing something wrong!***
- **Vs. 4** the author basically says, "At least you haven't died yet, so be encouraged."
- The author says, *"Look away to Jesus. The cross shows you that He's committed to seeing this thing through. The resurrection shows you that He is able to see it through. The cross shows you that the pain you are experiencing now is to be expected. But don't lose heart, God only brings the power of the resurrection through the pain of the cross."*
- I'm talking to some people in here this weekend that are about to give up! Don't do it! He's already won the race. You just need to get up and let Him finish His run through you.

3<sup>rd</sup> help to faith:

[5] 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. [6] For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." [7] It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.

**And jump down to vs. 11...** [11] 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. [12] Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.

Write down your 3<sup>rd</sup> help: (1. Consider the witnesses; 2. Look to Jesus... )

### 3. Trust the fatherly sovereignty of God

- There's actually two metaphors at work in these verses (which my English professor told me you are not supposed to do, but when the Holy Spirit is inspiring you, you can get away with it):
- The 1<sup>st</sup> metaphor is that of a **COACH**:
  - See the word "trained" (vs. 11)? *"gymnazo"* (from which we'd get our word 'gymnasium')
    - There is a sense in which God is working in your life like a coach. The way you grow a muscle grows is by breaking it down. But after you break it down, your body rebuilds is stronger.
    - **Here's the thing:** when you are being worked out. You don't feel stronger. ***David and I working out.*** I don't feel like I'm getting stronger, I feel like I'm going to die. But you are getting stronger.
    - Same with God. The muscle of your faith will never grow if it's not tested and broken down.
    - And it doesn't always make sense to you.
      - **Special on Phelps** – coach stepped on his goggles!
      - **Listen: Just because it's not your plan doesn't mean it's not a good plan.** You've got a good coach who is at work in all things working for your good, molding you into Christ's image.
      - ***Some of you need to hear this: the pain in your life right now; the pain you are going through right now, is God's good plan in your life*** to mold you into His image and to increase your faith and your delight in Him. He is tearing you down in your strength so He can rebuild you up in His.
- Which leads me to the 2<sup>nd</sup> metaphor he uses in these verses, that of a **FATHER**.

- The word used for “discipline” in vs. 5 is a different one than the one than the one in vs. 11. It’s the word “paidia” from which we get our word “pediatry.” Has to do with how a good father disciplines a child.
- A good parent disciplines his child for wrongdoing not to pay them back for their wrongdoing, but to form their character.
  - **When you discipline a child, you are not trying to AVENGE the wrong that they did.**
  - *You are going to PAY for having spilled that milk!* (At least (*ahemm*), it is not supposed to be like that! Sometimes, in my house, it is like that... but as a parent you are supposed to discipline a child only in order to mold their character.)
  - What you are doing for them you are doing in love. You might punish them in a way that wounds them (in some way), but your goal is not retribution, it is the building of character.
- Now, the author goes on to say that in vv. 8, 9, and 10 that no parent disciplines perfectly. (Sometimes we are more angered about how the child has inconvenienced us than we are concerned with their character.) But God is a perfect father and so his anger toward His children is never the anger of justice, it is the discipline of love.
  - Because, listen the gospel is that God paid Jesus back 100% for our sin. If you are a Christian, every ounce of punishment for sin was put upon Jesus, and for God to give one drop of that punishment for sin would be unjust, because God would be demanding two punishments for the same sin.
    - (Right? If your wife pays the power bill for your house and then the electric company sends you, the husband, the same bill and asks you to pay, you say, “that is not fair. That bill has been paid. You can’t ask for two payments for the same bill.” It’s the same with God.)
    - There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ because the full condemnation fell upon Jesus.
- So, if you are a believer, God is never ‘paying you back for your sin’ in the hardships of life. I hear believers say that all the time. “I think God is paying me back for this decision.” I know people that feel like they live under the curse of something they did years ago!
- Jesus absorbed all of the curse for you! He took all the judgment; all of the punishment. Nothing is left for you but mercy.
- So in your pain He’s not “paying you back;” he might be trying to *bring you back*,” but that is different.
- Let me try to distinguish *three things* people often get confused (**punishment; discipline and consequences**)
  - **Punishment/Judgment:** you are being paid back for the wrong you’ve done. The code of justice has been broken; you must pay.
  - **Discipline:** this is a loving attempt to mold character. It might involve pain, but the goal is not retribution, it is formation.
  - **Consequences**—these are just natural results from bad decisions.
    - You have sex outside marriage and the girl gets pregnant. That’s not punishment, *per se*; it’s biology.
    - You cheat on your spouse and the trust in your marriage is destroyed; you’re a **self-absorbed father** and your kids end up estranged; you **cheat** and get kicked out of school; you do **sloppy work** and lose your job. These are all just **natural consequences**.
      - *God can use consequences as discipline in your life, but technically, you should think of them differently.*
- **Punishment; discipline and consequences:** Believers suffer consequences for their sin, and sometimes God uses those consequences to discipline them, but they never suffer punishment, because Jesus was punished fully in our

place so all that is left for us is mercy. God is molding your character in love, not punishing you in judgment.

- **Jared Wilson** tells a story in *Gospel Wakefulness* about a friend who made some disastrous decisions that basically destroyed his family. This guy talked about how bitter the consequences of his sin was: relationships permanently damaged; trust irrevocably destroyed. But he said that suffering those natural consequences, as painful as that was, **reminded him (get this) that the ultimate consequence for his sin had been absorbed by Jesus.** Experiencing the natural consequences of my sin became a means of relishing God's grace toward him.

**To the believer (you have to understand this) God is committed to growing you up in Him and a lot of times He uses pain and disappointment to do it!** Some of you think God only as a "precious moments" God who coddles you or gives us warm fuzzies or He's a celestial piñata that you can whack with the faith stick and get goodies out of. And so you get angry at Him when things aren't going your way or think He's forgotten you or you quit believing in Him.

God's love a fatherly love; a tough love; a love that forges our character and grows us up into maturity.

- I've heard it said that the difference in mothers and fathers (and this is an oversimplification) is that mothers show their affection by **pulling kids close** and fathers show their affection by **pushing kids out**. Kids get hurt and Veronica's all over them pulling them in; comforting them. In the pool I am showing my love for my kids by pushing them out, saying "Ok, swim to me. Jump to me." (Again, oversimplification, but both are love.) **One shows love by tenderness in pain; the other shows love creating situations to grow them up.** Veronica comforts them when they are hurt; I create situations in which they hurt themselves. That's our team approach to parenting.

- Both are love; God does both to you. He is tender and He is tough.

Do you trust that in all things God is disciplining you as a son or daughter? That an all-knowing, all-powerful God is in control of all things and using them all for your good! The writer says that is important in developing faith! Because it means that in everything—every difficult situation, every frustration, every inconvenience, every disappointment, every broken-heart, every tragedy... God is at work forging your character.

- (Let me show you 1 textual thing that is too good to pass up. The writer vs. 5, "Don't take lightly God's discipline." See that?)
  - The Greek word translated "*take lightly*" is the exact same word translated "despise" in Heb 12:2 where it says Jesus "despised," or "took lightly" the shame of the cross.
  - On the cross, he took lightly the pain and the scorn of others. We are told not to despise, or take lightly, the discipline of God.
  - Usually we reverse those. We despise the pain in our life but put value on the opinions of others. What we should put value on (the discipline of God!) we take lightly; and what we should take lightly (the opinion of others), we put value on.
  - And that's because we don't esteem what God esteems, the growth of our faith. There is nothing on earth more valuable than faith; no greater gift God could give to you than faith.
  - **So God will sometimes take away things of lesser value to work in you the thing of greatest value: faith).**
  - **GOD IS HIS OWN REWARD (HEB 11:6)**

#### 4. Focus on the joy

Let's go back to the phrase we skipped in vs. 2: **(vs. 2) 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**

- What was it that held Christ to the cross? The nails? No, he raised the dead, calmed storms and walked through walls; he could have gotten out of those! What held him to the cross, according to vs. 2, was the joy that awaited him on the other side.
  - The joy of what? Well, think about it: What would He obtain after the cross that He wouldn't have before? The approval of God? Already had that. The kingship of the universe? Already his. The adoration of angels? His from eternity past. **What is the one thing he would have after the cross that He didn't have before?** You. He was doing this to save *you*. We were His inheritance: for the joy of reconciling you and me to Himself He endured the cross.
  - If Christ felt that way about you, doesn't that make you long to see Him?
- **So the author says, "Look to Jesus' joy!"** If this is the God who gave it all up to save you, doesn't that empower you to give up what you have for Him? Doesn't that make you willing to suffer for His sake?
- And, furthermore, if Christ gave Himself up so that you could be saved, doesn't that make you willing to give up what you have so that others could be saved?
  - When you were lost, Jesus made your rescue his joy. If that is true, *can't you make the rescue of others* (who are in the same condition you were in before Jesus rescued you) *your joy?*

People of faith are joy driven! That's the biggest difference in the religious and those transformed by the gospel. Religious are duty driven; you dread what I'll say each week: what else is he going to make me feel guilty about?

People who have been transformed by the gospel are driven by the joy of knowing and pleasing the one who gave up everything to save them and the joy of rescuing others just like they were rescued.

- **Why is it you should give up your possessions, your time, your lives, to see people reached?**
  - It's not because you have taken a vow of poverty or you don't enjoy nice things; it is that the joy of what you'll obtain by giving those things away is greater than the joy you derive from those things?
  - Our definition of sacrifice: giving up something you love for something you love even more.
  - **Every penny I have EVER given away I've loved. I've sadly watched them go. But I love the idea of pleasing Jesus and seeing people come into the kingdom more.**

Which is what makes vs. 1 so powerful to me: **(vs. 1)** "...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.

- Sins AND weights. The Christian experience is not simply, "What do I have to give up because it is sin," but what keeps me from knowing and pleasing Jesus? What keeps me from rescuing the lost? What dilutes my life from the mission?
- **Think of it like a runner or a swimmer who lays aside everything that slows him down. They get rid of all body fat; hair; even decent clothing.**
- It's not illegal to swim in the Olympics with a full beard and a pair of jeans, but it's just not helpful for the objective.
- It becomes less about "what do I have to give up because it is sin?" and "what best enables me to please Jesus and complete the mission?"
- Many of you have hobbies or possessions that are fine in themselves, but I would say that they probably distract from the mission. They may not be "sins," *per se*, but they are weights.

People of faith are those who are so consumed by the vision of eternity that they gladly give up their lives here for joy of what they obtain there. Faith is living in a way now that 100 years from now you'll be glad that you did!

In Richmond, VA, at the headquarters of the International Mission Board, there is a wall of panels on which are inscribed the names of every Southern Baptist missionary who has died on the field for the past 150 years. It's very moving. Fathers and mothers and wives and children and grandparents who gave up everything and paid with their lives, some dying of disease, some of starvation, some in violent acts of persecution. At the top of the plaque is inscribed **Hebrews 12:2**, "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Let me share one story with you, given to me by a member of our church who lived in Afghanistan for many years:

*In January 2008, a friend ours, Clara, was kidnapped in Afghanistan by the Taliban. Clara was a humanitarian aid worker and Christian woman that had moved to this far off country to help serve the poorest of the poor. She had worked for over 5 years in some of the harshest areas of the country, leading a women's skills training program, and being light for the gospel in a very dark place. Her presence in the city was a threat to radical Islamic religious leaders for several reasons. For one, she was bringing education to women, whom they believe should not learn skills that allow women to work except in domestic chores. Second, she was a Christian woman, and they were threatened by the thought that women would be exposed to outside ideas.*

*She had gone to serve Afghans out of a desire to be a witness for the Lord; the only reason she was there in southern Afghanistan, was because of the gospel. It was her understanding of what Christ had done for her on the cross, and how he "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant", that led her to leave her life in suburban Richmond to move to one of the most forsaken places on earth, a place where dust storms were a daily occurrence, where windows had to have blast film because of the risk of explosions at any time, a place where there was no electricity to run a fan in the 100 degree*

*heat in the summer, where she would have only sporadic internet access to write emails or get news from home, a place where an armed Islamic group that is hostile to the gospel operates with impunity. She did this because she understood that Christ had come to earth to face even greater dangers, even more separation from his father, even more discomfort for our sake.*

*I and a few others from our team ended up negotiating with the hostage takers for six months. During that time, we received news that she was being moved around to keep her hidden. The US military tried several rescue attempts. In fact, it was the same unit that did the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound--Seal Team 6--that was tasked with trying to rescue her. Twice they got very close to rescuing her. One of those times she had been moved to a neighboring house as the troops arrived. Another time she was hidden in the basement of the house, and the rescue team just missed her. You can only imagine the frustration Clara must have felt to hear her rescuers just feet away, and then to realize that the attempt had failed. From knowing Clara, I can tell you, despite these disappointments she did not lose faith in her real Savior.*

*When news of Clara's kidnapping was heard in the streets, Pushtun women from this southern stronghold of the Taliban were outraged. For the first and only time in the history of that oppressed place, 300 women marched to the governor's mansion to demand that he do something to free her. These women had benefited from her project, and were not protesting because Clara had taught them a few skills. They demonstrated because of the incredible witness of humble service that Clara had had. They protested, you might say, because they saw Christ in her.*

*I wish I could share with you this story ends happily. But this story has no ending. We do not know what happened to Clara. She kept being moved from village to village, handed off from one group of rogue men to another. The last we heard, she was handed over to a nomadic group of arms smugglers that wandered through the Desert of Death in southeastern Afghanistan. And then she disappeared. We do not know if she was killed. They had threatened*



*to kill her because they had found Christian literature on her computer, but we have no proof, no body. But she has not been heard from in over 2 years. She simply disappeared.*

*Is she an extraordinary hero of faith? Well, in a sense she was. I, along with several members of the Summit Church, knew her well. She is a woman of faith. But if I sit and remember her as she was, she was a regular woman from Richmond, Virginia. A friendly, smiling, friend. A person who struggled along with the rest of us when it was hot, and who loved to go on vacation. A regular American girl who decided to step out in faith, and obey a calling from the Lord to go to a place she was not sure she could handle. I saw God's grace and strength enable her to develop an amazing project among the women in southern Afghanistan. And I know that God's grace and strength were with her when she was taken by the Taliban.*

*Faith is demonstrated in times of adversity, but its work is manifest long before that. Sometimes faith is quiet, working humbly in love. But it is that same faith that makes a regular girl like Clara stand up to one of history's most vicious regimes and say, "Christ is better. And the mission is worth it."*

Apart from faith in Christ there is no explanation for such a life. Is there an explanation for your life apart from faith?

- Is your life the kind that you would say, "If there is no God, and these promises are not true, none of this is worth it!"
- If not, you're not walking by faith and your life is not pleasing God.

**It is faith that gives you the ability to lay it all on the line. To obey even when it makes sense. To forgive someone who has hurt you. To get back up after you fall. To pray when things seem hopeless. To hope even in the dark chapters.**

Have you laid it all on the line? Will you?

PRAYER