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, 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.
CONTEXT

Begin your session by setting the context for Hebrews 12:1-2. Read through the material below and use what you think will help your students best understand the background of the passages.

Believers under persecution had to continue trusting Jesus. In order to reinforce that crucial mandate, the writer of Hebrews provided a list of individuals in the Old Testament who had been faithful to God in Hebrews 11. In Hebrews 12, he urged Christians to follow the example of those heroes of the faith. The writer of Hebrews was writing to encourage believers to keep trusting Christ. To do so, he compared trusting the Lord to running a race. The image highlighted the need for believers to get rid of anything that prevented them from pursuing Christ. Also, this passage instructed them to keep their eyes on Jesus as they ran. He alone deserved their undivided attention. He ran the race perfectly and took His rightful seat at God’s throne (Heb. 12:1-3).

The writer also stressed that these believers should embrace God’s perspective on their suffering. They could endure hardship because they belonged to Him. Calling attention to Proverbs 3:11-12, the writer reminded these believers that the Lord was like a father who wanted His sons to learn endurance. For that reason, He disciplined them. In the midst of trials and tough times, these Christians may have come to believe that the Lord didn’t care about them, but He continued to love them in the midst of their suffering. His love for them moved Him to discipline them so they would grow toward spiritual maturity. While God’s discipline was painful, it would have a positive effect on their maturity and strengthen their faith in Him (Heb. 12:4-11).

Therefore, Christians under fire had no better choice than to keep on moving ahead in their relationship with Jesus. Instead of being paralyzed by difficulty, they should be determined to keep trusting Him in all trials and difficult times (Heb. 12:12-13).

TRANSITION TO INDIVIDUAL STUDY

After you have set the context, move your students into the Exploration time in their Personal Study Guides. There are several different ways that you can lead your students to explore the Scripture.

1. Lead your students to work through all of the Scripture and questions, then discuss their responses together as a group.
2. Guide your students to work through the Scripture and questions one question at a time. Pause for group discussion after each question.

Whichever method you choose, make sure that the students have an opportunity to explore the Scripture for themselves.
Conversation

Invite a volunteer to read verses 1-2 aloud. Guide students to discuss their answers to the two quick response questions at the very beginning of the session in their Personal Study Guides:

❯ What area of your life do you find that you need the most encouragement?

❯ What would you find the most difficult about running a marathon? Would you rather run a marathon or series of sprints? Why?

The purpose of these group questions is to get your students to think about how the Christian life is like running a race. In running a race, we need encouragement to finish, a clear view of the finish line, and a motivation that is greater than our victory. In the Christian life, Jesus provides all of that for us. Your students should walk away from today’s session with the encouragement they need to run the race with endurance.

ITEM 9 (LEADER PACK) Athletes used running stones to help improve their momentum. Briefly explain this concept to your students, then direct their attention to the Running Stones poster.

HEBREWS 12:1

Call for a volunteer to read verse 1. The first two questions will address the first half of the verse, while the last two will deal with the last half of the verse. Begin to debrief what students have learned by turning their attention to the great cloud of witnesses.

❯ Who do you think the writer is referring to when he mentions the great cloud of witnesses?

Allow your students some time to answer this question and discuss it together. It will be interesting to see if any of them remember what you talked about last session when you were looking at Hebrews 11.

Direct the conversation by pointing out the word “therefore” at the beginning of the verse. Remind students that this word was used to summarize the point of the previous verses. Explain that Hebrews 12:1 is the beginning of the summary of all of chapter 11. The “therefore” points back to all of the people of faith who have gone before us. Everyone that chapter 11 talks about is in the great cloud of witnesses noted in Hebrews 12:1. As the writer began to encourage the church, he basically said that because we have such a great group of people of faith who have gone before us, their example is a reminder we can live a victorious Christian life. It is an awesome thought and also humbling. Challenge students to look back at chapter 11 and note all the names mentioned there. Lead a discussion of why it’s encouraging that Enoch, Noah, Abel, Abraham, and Joseph all stand as our examples in the faith.
HEBREWS 12:1

Hebrews 12 is one of the more well-known chapters of the book. Many of us have heard numerous sermons on the first two verses, and for good reason! They sum up the whole purpose of Hebrews.

As a reminder, the original audience of Hebrews had been very strong in their faith at one point. However, their strength had faded to spiritual weakness, their hearts had grown dull, and they had become spiritually hard of hearing (Heb. 5:11-14). Many of us have experienced something similar, and certainly, no believer walks perfectly. That ought never to be a comfort to us though, since it is always spiritually dangerous to be in this position.

Therefore, God warned us in Hebrews on many occasions not to shrink back (Heb. 2:1-4; 10:37-39). Warnings are frightening and hard to hear, but they are given to us as a way to help us know how serious we must take the matter of perseverance. As Christians, we must “run with endurance,” and not even think about quitting the race! “Let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it” (4:1). This is designed to show us how serious endurance is for the believer, and how spiritually dangerous it is to be anywhere else other than walking with Christ!

Hebrews 12:1-7 calls us to the spiritual race and exhorts us to run with all of our might. The Christian life is compared to a race in a first-century Roman arena, surrounded by vast numbers of witnesses. As Christians, we are to cast off sin and anything else that would inhibit our running well (vv. 1-2). But what about those who know Christ and struggle with sin? We all have encountered this unfortunate reality, and, thankfully, God deals with us as His children who need to be trained. In the end, our sins do not overcome the grace of God and His work of conversion. In fact, in the larger context of Hebrews 12:3-11 the author offers us a bit of comfort to us when are being disciplined by God: the very fact that God disciplines us is a demonstration of His love and commitment to us and is evidence that we truly belong to Him. He does this so that each of us will run the race of the Christian life, persevering until the end.
What do you think the purpose of the great group of witnesses is in our lives?

Encourage students to discuss this great cloud of witnesses and you might have paper available for them to sketch what they imagine when they read this verse. Explain that the writer used figurative language to help us understand the purpose of this group of witnesses. It is as if the saints who have gone on before us, the heroes of the faith that have given their lives for the sake of Christ, are surrounding us and cheering us on! Their lives stand as a testimony of faith and encourage us to run the race with vigor and endurance. Specifically mention some of the people the Scriptures say are in the crowd. Read aloud Hebrews 11:37. Help them to understand that there are many in the grandstands of heaven who were martyred for their commitment to God who are now cheering us on. That should really cause us to examine our lives and what it is we are attempting to accomplish for Christ.

What do you think it means to lay aside the weight of sin that entangles us? What image does that language create in your mind?

Moving into the directive of Scripture, stress that because we have this great group of saints to encourage us, we should do something about it! The first thing that we are instructed to do is to lay aside the weight and the sin that weigh us down. Point out that the writer’s race illustration is in its fullest use here. Help students understand that to live the Christian life, we have to put off everything that would slow us down. Talk together about what that might be. Help students see that this is not referring to the “big” sins that we tend to avoid, but the small ones that we do not pay much attention to, like lying, cursing, and slander, just to name a few. These may not be sins that would keep us from running, but they will definitely slow us down.

The Scripture compares the Christian life to running a race. How does the writer say we are supposed to run?

Challenge students to identify how we are to run the race before us, according to verse 1 (Answer: with endurance). The writer used some Greek words that give us the emotion that he was trying to convey. The word “run” here means to exert one’s self or to strive hard. The word “endurance” describes a man who does not swerve from his deliberate purpose or his loyalty to faith, even in the greatest trials and sufferings. Help students to see this picture of a person on a mission. He knows where he is going, and there is no option but to complete the task. This person is aware that it will not be easy, but that does not deter him. He is committed; he is resolute. He will run, and he will run hard. He will not give up in the face of adversity, and regardless of what may get in his way, he will never give up. He will throw off anything that hinders his progress and keep his eyes on the prize. Ask: Does this describe you? Point out that this is a lofty goal, but achievable through the grace of Jesus Christ!

ITEM 10 LEADER PACK: Point out the 4 different types of venues listed on the Athletic Venues poster. Briefly discuss some of the events from the Greco-Roman world and what each of the venue’s purposes were.
One interpretation of the writer’s illustration in Hebrews 12:1 is that the witnesses were looking down from heaven and observing believers’ efforts in the Christian race. An alternate view is that the records of God’s faithful people remained as powerful testimony that the race of faith could be run victoriously.

The phrase “every weight” referred to anything that would keep Christians from living the Christian life successfully, such as lack of faith, pride, or effort.

In Greek times, the runners would use weights when they were training to build up their endurance and stamina. As the writer penned this illustration he was sure that the readers would be able to relate to the application. See Pack Item 9 for more explanation.
The truths have been profound and applicable for our lives so far, and the writer wasn’t finished. Hebrews 12:2 ends with the one factor that will keep us on track and give us the motivation we need to finish the race strong. Direct attention to the questions for these verses.

❯ Where are we to keep our eyes focused? Why is this so important?

To pursue something, you have to know what the goal is. Guide students to think through and discuss the goals of things they might pursue. For example, if you are going to college, then it is helpful to know what you will need to graduate. Going to college isn’t the goal, but graduation is. Stress that so many people live the Christian life and never know what the goal is. The sad thing is that most people think that heaven is the ultimate goal of the Christian life, but that is not the case! The writer of Hebrews never said that we were to keep our eyes on heaven. He instructed believers to keep their eyes on Jesus. Jesus is and has always been and will always be our goal. We are to run with our eyes focused on Jesus!

❯ Write down two words that are used to describe roles that Jesus plays when it comes to our faith. Identify and attempt to explain these two words.

Point out that Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus is the source and perfecter of our faith. This wording may be a little different, depending on what translation you are using. Help students understand that having faith is not the goal of faith. Stress that you cannot just have faith in your ability to believe in something, but your faith should be in Jesus alone. Explain that Jesus is not only the source of our faith, but He is also the ultimate example of faith for us. His life perfected faith for us.

❯ What was the finish line that motivated Jesus and allowed Him to endure the race that was set before Him?

Explain that many commentators point to two things that this verse is referring to. One is the joy Jesus found in fulfilling the will of His Father. Everything that Jesus did while on earth was about the glory of God. His joy was found in the Father. The other thought comes from the definition of joy. It means the occasion or persons who are one’s joy. That’s you and me—we were His joy and still are!

❯ What did Jesus go through for us as He ran the race that the Father put before Him?

Scripture says that Jesus was willing to endure the pain of the cross and the shame that came with it for the salvation of those who were and are His joy. Ask a few students to share their responses about what Jesus went through for us on the cross.
Persevering in the Christian life demands focus. The writer of Hebrews urged Christians to join him in concentrating on Jesus. They were to consider past heroes of the faith, but they were to look primarily and steadily to Jesus.

The Greek phrase translated “keeping…eyes on” (“looking unto,” KJV; “fix … eyes on,” NIV; “looking to,” ESV) means giving undivided attention by looking away from every other object.

The writer presented Jesus as the supreme example of faithful perseverance in God’s purpose. The Pioneer and Perfecter of believers’ faith looked beyond crucifixion to the joy that lay before Him (“set before him,” KJV; NIV; ESV) resurrection, ascension, and exaltation.

HEBREWS 12:2
There are many great parallels between the a physical race and spiritual race, but there is one major difference between the two (Heb. 12:1-2). In a physical race or marathon you compete for the best time against other individuals. But in the Christian race, we run the race together.

In our running, we must run well. Verses 1-2 give us several instructions and applies a spiritual meaning to a well-known ancient sport. In the ancient world, runners would remove anything that added weight and often ran practically naked. Every encumbrance was laid aside, so that there was no possibility of falling. These athletes were rigorous and demonstrated great discipline in their training. All of this was done for a single purpose: to run well and win the race. How much more important is the spiritual race that is set before us? Every spiritual weight must be cast off, and every sin that continues to plague our hearts must be laid aside.

God is committed to our endurance, and He is also committed to our training and discipline. He always keeps the ultimate goal in mind, even though we can lose sight of it. Let us lay all of these things aside by daily confessing our sins, turning from them and turning to Christ. The race we run and the battles we fight will end only when Jesus summons us home to heaven, or He returns to consummate His kingdom. Until then, let us diligently obey this exhortation, knowing that we do not run alone.

Think about all that God has provided for us as we live out the Christian life. First, we have the testimony of those in the past to encourage us (Heb. 11:4-40). Second, we have one another to pick us up when we are weak—we run as a team and a family, not forgetting to meet and be together (Heb. 10:25). Third, we have been given access to the throne of heaven and have been encouraged to draw near to God, where we find grace and mercy in any time of need (Heb. 4:14-16). Fourth, we have Jesus, our great High Priest who ever lives to intercede for us (Heb. 7:25). He is the perfeector of our faith who has set the greatest of all examples for us to follow. So, let us fix our eyes on Him, who ran with the utmost endurance (v. 2). He saw the joy and glory set before Him, as well as the lofty and exalted position of the right hand of God the Father. He endured the cross with all of its humiliation and shame. Think about that: He looked through the physical and spiritual agony of the cross because of joy! Therefore let us consider too the indescribable joy that awaits each of us who runs with endurance and finishes the course!
Central Truth

*Jesus is the strength we need to persevere.*

Give your students some time to discuss the application of the **Central Truth**. The whole session revolved around the image of running the race of the Christian life. As they think about and discuss how Jesus is our strength, focus the discussion on the major reasons why He is our strength. Point out that we have a great example set before us in the witnesses that chapter 11 discusses. Second, we have great finish line to focus on—Jesus! Third, we have the example in Jesus Himself who bore the shame of the cross because we were on His mind.

**Now What?**

Lead your students through the **Now What?** questions to help them begin to apply the truths that they have learned.

- Think again about those who encourage you. Write down the names of your great cloud of witnesses.

- What sins ensnare you and keep you from running the race for Jesus? Confess those sins and strive to run in God’s freedom.

- Up to this point, what has been your finish line?

- What do you need to do to change your finish line and begin running after Jesus?

Help your students to focus on their spiritual race during the **Now What?** section. The reality of the Scripture comes alive as they begin to think about who encourages them, what sins they need to let go of, and who their eyes are to be fixed on throughout their lives.
PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Finish your group time with these thoughts and encourage your students to memorize the verse listed this week. Also, encourage your group to take advantage of the Keep on Digging section in their Personal Study Guide.

❯ Dwell: The writer uses a great illustration that creates a powerful word picture as we think about laying aside sin that entangles us. Think about something that you have gotten tangled up in when you were walking or running. It could be a cord or a piece of clothing but it gets entangled in your feet and keeps you from running at your full capacity. The picture is not of something that stops us but slow us down. As you think about the Scripture this week think about those areas of your life where you are allowing “small sins” to slow you down. They are not the giant sins that we seem to avoid but the small ones that will slow us down and eventually render us ineffective. What will it take to lay those aside?

❯ Memorize: Hebrews 12:1-2

❯ Pray: Let your prayer today revolve around the verses that you memorized. It is a great discipline to learn how to pray Scripture. Thank Jesus for the great cloud of witnesses that reside in heaven and are there to cheer us on in our faith. Also thank Him for your great cloud that is present with you that encourages you in your faith. Ask Jesus to give you the strength to run with endurance, to keep your eyes on Jesus, and to run hard toward the finish line.

❯ Keep on Digging: There is a connection between verses 1-2 and verses 3-7. Sometimes this connection is not always obvious, but God wants each of us to run with endurance and to finish the race. He desires for us to run well. However, we still struggle at times with sin, and with hearts that do not want to submit to God’s Word. As our loving and wise heavenly Father, God knows this, and He will train us through sufferings and trials, disciplining us for our good.

Think of biblical examples of God’s loving discipline and training:

❯ Moses who spent 40 years on the “backside of the desert” (Ex. 3:1).
❯ Joseph who was sold into slavery (Ex. 37:25-28; 39:19-23).
❯ David was disciplined when he had Uriah killed after stealing his wife Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-20)