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FAITH TO RUN

THE CHRISTIAN MARATHON

Hebrews 12:1-3

By

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Hebrews Lesson 44

Faith to Run the Christian Marathon Hebrews 12:1-3

For many years I've jogged for exercise, but I've never run a marathon. My knees have never been strong enough to endure that long of a race. I have run a couple of 10K races. But if you have run in at least a 5K race, you should be able to identify with our text. If the thought of running in such a race makes you want to go take a nap, I only point out that I derived the metaphor of running a Christian long-distance race from the text itself. I didn't make it up! If you're a couch potato type, maybe you've seen a race on TV that will help you to relate to this message.

In Hebrews 10:36, the author exhorted his readers, "For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" [lit., "the promise"]. Then he devotes chapter 11 to many examples of Old Testament saints who endured by faith, although they did not receive the promise (Christ), which we have received. In our text, he returns to the theme of endurance, saying, "We have both this great cloud of witnesses from the Old Testament and Jesus Himself, who is the supreme example of one who endured horrible suffering by faith. He endured the cross and now is at the Father's right hand." So,

To run the Christian marathon with endurance, faith focuses on Jesus, who endured the cross and received the reward.

1. The Christian life is a difficult marathon that we must run.

Many years ago, a young woman who was a drug addict found my name in the phone book and began calling me frequently. She was married with two small children, but she was hooked on drugs. She had no concept that normal people sleep at night, and so she would call at 2 a.m. from some phone booth where she was stoned out of her mind.

She professed to believe in Christ, and said that she wanted to follow Him, but she had no idea of what that meant. On one occasion when she was relatively sober, I described in detail what a daily

walk with Christ looks like. I explained what a daily time in the Word and prayer was like, what obedience to the Bible means, how to think like a Christian, etc.

When I was done, I asked, "Have you ever done anything close to what I've just described?" She said, "Yeah, I did that once for two weeks, but it didn't work." She thought that she had given it a fair try in two weeks! I explained to her that the Christian faith isn't a two-week sprint. It's a lifelong marathon.

The Christian life is a lifelong, grueling race that entails some long hills to climb and some swampy marshes to plod through. To make it to the end, you need self-discipline to get into good shape, you will need to maintain your motivation, and you will need sustained effort. No one enters a marathon with the thought of dropping out after a mile. Finishing well is everything. In this race, you are not competing with other believers. We're all on the same team. We're competing against the enemy of our souls, who opposes God's kingdom and wants us to drop out.

2. To run the Christian marathon, we must get into shape and stay in shape.

The primary thing, as I said, is self-discipline motivated by the goal of finishing well. But it specifically involves two things:

A. We must lay aside every encumbrance.

The word means *weight*. It can refer to physical weight (obesity), or to unnecessary baggage. Ancient Greek runners would actually run naked so as not to be encumbered. Olympic athletes in our day wear some pretty skimpy outfits. They don't want anything to slow them down or drain their energy.

Picture the start of the Boston Marathon. The lean, muscular Kenyan runners are at the front of the pack, waiting for the starting gun. A couple of skinny American runners are there, too. But next to them is a fat, flabby guy wearing a parka, all-weather pants, hiking boots, with a 50-pound pack. You ask curiously, "What's in your pack?" He says, "I've got all the sodas and Twinkies that I'll need to finish this race." You're thinking, "Right!" That guy wouldn't stand a chance of finishing, let alone winning, because he has not laid aside every encumbrance.

Encumbrances are distinguished here from sins. They include things that are not intrinsically wrong, but they're wrong because they keep you from running as you should. If you got rid of those heavy hiking boots and put on some jogging shoes, you'd run better. If you dropped the pack and dressed in shorts and a tank top, you might finish the race.

At the risk of stepping on some toes, but to help you apply this, let me get more specific. Let's say that in the morning, you don't have time to read your Bible *and* the newspaper before you head out the door to work or school. Which do you choose? You protest, "But I need to keep abreast of what's happening in the world!" Really? Where does the Bible say that? It does say that you need to drink in "the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2). Maybe you don't have time to read *anything* because you don't set your alarm early enough to spend just 10 minutes with the Lord. You need to shed the encumbrance of loving sleep or the paper more than God.

Too much recreation can be another encumbrance in the race. We all need *some* free time free to be renewed, but the question is, "How much time do you need?" Many Christians fill every evening watching TV or playing computer games, but they don't have time to study the Bible or read good books. They view the entire weekend as a time for recreation, even if it means missing church. To run the race, you've got to lay aside these encumbrances.

Some Christians ask the wrong question here. They ask, "What's wrong with this movie, or listening to this music, or participating in this activity?" The right question is, "Does this help me to grow in godliness?" If not, cast it off as dead weight.

B. We must lay aside every sin that so easily entangles us.

In biblical times people wore long robes. You can't run with a long robe entangling your legs. You must either pull it up and tuck it in your belt or cast it totally aside. In the case of sin, you must totally get rid of it if you want to run the Christian race.

This doesn't refer only to certain besetting sins, but to all sins. Sin always begins in the mind, and so we must judge all sin at the thought level. Pride, lust, envy, greed, anger, grumbling, selfishness—all of these things originate in our thought life. If you cut it

off there, it goes no farther. If you entertain these things, they incubate and develop into sinful words and actions (James 1:14-15). But the author's point is, you can't run the Christian race if you keep tripping over your sins.

3. To run the Christian marathon, we must run with endurance the course set before us.

Note two things:

- A. God sets the course.

If you're running a marathon, you can't make up your own course. If you stray from the course, you'll be disqualified. The race is "set before us," just as Jesus had "the joy set before Him." God is the Sovereign One who sets the course for each of us, just as He set the course of the cross for Jesus.

To finish the Christian marathon, it's important to keep in mind at all times that the Sovereign God sets the course. You may not like parts of the course. You may be prone to grumble, "Why did the course have to go over this hill, or through this swamp?" The answer is, "Because the Sovereign God planned it this way." You won't be able to run by faith unless you submit your will to His will.

- B. We must run with endurance.

Running with endurance requires adopting a certain mindset. If you have in mind that you're running a 400-meter race, you're not going to do well when the pack keeps going after 400 meters. When you learn that the race has barely begun, you're going to quit with a bad attitude.

This is what Jesus meant when He talked about counting the cost of following Him (Luke 14:28-33). Before you make a glib commitment to be a Christian, think it through. Are you willing to put out the effort, the sweat, the endurance, and the pain of going the distance? If not, don't start the race, because you're going to look pretty silly when you drop out after 400 meters!

Obviously, one key to running the whole distance is motivation. But where do you get the motivation to run the Christian marathon? Our author suggests two sources, both valuable, but the second is incomparably greater than the first.

4. The encouragement to keep running comes from those who have run before us, but primarily from Jesus Himself.
 - A. The great cloud of witnesses encourages us to keep running.

The opening phrase of 12:1 refers back to chapter 11. All of the Old Testament saints, who endured all sorts of trials by faith, should encourage us to keep running when we feel like quitting. The word *cloud* was a classical Greek metaphor for a large multitude (editor's footnote in *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p.311).

There is a question about whether these witnesses are watching us from heaven as we run the race; or, more in line with the meaning of the word *witness*, do we look to their testimony as an example of how to run the race? There is no indication in the Bible (unless it is here) that those in heaven are watching us on earth.

Probably, with the race metaphor, the picture here is that as we run the race, along the route we encounter the Old Testament saints (and, by extension, other heroes of the faith in the New Testament, plus those who lived after biblical times). They are calling out to us by their examples of faith, "Keep going, I made it and you can, too! I know it's hard, but the reward is worth it! Don't quit! The finish line is not too far ahead!"

I would encourage you to study both the many interesting characters in the Bible and the great men and women who have run the race of faith over the course of church history. You'll learn how they failed, so that you don't have to make the same mistakes. And you'll learn how they ran well, so that you can imitate their faith (13:7). Many of the battles they fought, whether on a personal level or in their ministries, you will have to fight, too.

Knowing that a godly pastor like Jonathan Edwards got voted out of his church, and understanding the reasons why, can be a great source of encouragement to a pastor who is battling in a difficult church ministry. Realizing all of the problems that Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission went through can help you to hang in there when problems multiply. I sometimes think about the disappointments, suffering, and persecution that Adoniram Judson endured in Burma and think, "I can endure a few hardships in the

ministry.” But the best help in the race of faith does not come from this cloud of witnesses.

B. Jesus Himself is the main motivation to keep running.

The main way to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” is, “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:2-3).

The pronoun “our” is not in the original before faith (as in the NIV & KJV). The Greek text has the definite article, “the faith,” meaning, the faith that is needed to endure. Jesus is the author or Captain of that kind of faith, and He brings it to perfection or completion. He is the A to Z, the complete encyclopedia of faith.

The name “Jesus” deliberately focuses on His humanity. As a man, Jesus showed us exactly how to live by faith in God in this world. He trusted God at the beginning of His ministry when Satan tempted Him. He relied on God to such a degree that He could claim, “the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing” (John 5:19). He claimed to speak the very words that He heard from the Father (John 8:38). He trusted the Father in the Garden and He went to the cross entrusting His soul to the Father. His final words included, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46). So from start to finish, but especially on the cross, Jesus showed us how to walk by faith. The text reveals five things about Jesus:

(1) Jesus is the author or captain of faith.

We encountered this word in Hebrews 2:10, which stated that God perfected the author (or, captain) of our salvation through sufferings. It is also used in Acts 3:15 (you “put to death the Prince of life”) and Acts 5:31 (“whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and Savior”). It can mean *author* or *originator*, in the sense that Jesus is the source of life, salvation, and faith. It also refers to the *leader* or *captain*, the one who goes before the troops, showing them the way.

All of these senses of the word apply to Jesus with regard to our faith. No sinner is capable of believing in Christ for salvation unless He grants it (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Eph. 2:8, 9; Phil. 1:29). But, also, He blazes the trail of faith for all who follow Him. He goes before us, showing us how to live by faith in God alone.

(2) Jesus is the perfecter of faith.

This means that He finished the course of faith perfectly, showing us how to finish well. But also, He brings our faith to completion, as Paul states (Phil. 1:6), "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

(3) Jesus shows us the motivation to endure by faith.

"Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross." The reason that Jesus could endure the horrible prospect of bearing our sin was that He focused on the joy set before Him. This joy included the joy of "bringing many sons to glory" (2:10; see also, Isa. 53:10-11). But also, the greatest joy was that of glorifying the Father by completing the work that the Father gave Him to do (John 17). When Jesus returned to heaven, triumphant over Satan, sin, death, and hell, the angels rejoiced. The marriage supper of the Lamb will be a time for us to "rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him" (Rev. 19:7). Keeping that glorious joy in view enabled Jesus to endure the agony of the cross.

(4) Jesus shows us the greatest example of endurance by faith through the most difficult trial ever.

"He endured the cross, despising the shame." He "endured such hostility by sinners against Himself." No one has ever endured a greater trial than the cross. Others have been crucified and others have been tortured in indescribably horrible ways. But only Jesus knew the glory and joy of perfect fellowship with the Father in heaven before coming to this earth. Only Jesus knew the perfect holiness of His divine nature. To leave heaven and take on the form of a servant and be obedient to His death on the cross as the substitute for our sins, is unmatched in human history.

(5) Jesus shows us the final reward of faith.

He “has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” He is in the most exalted place in the universe, the place of all rule and authority. The holy angels bow before Him in adoration and reverence. While Jesus is unique, His exaltation to the right hand of the throne of God shows us a glimpse of His glory that we will share throughout eternity, if by faith we run with endurance.

5. We run with endurance by fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Note four things:

A. Fixing our eyes on Jesus requires taking our eyes off of ourselves.

“Fixing our eyes” is literally “looking off to.” The idea is taking your eyes off of other things and focusing on Jesus alone. The Bible tells us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). We must examine ourselves before partaking of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:28). But, we should not live with our focus constantly on ourselves, but rather, on the Lord. In your daily quiet time, it’s good to pause and examine your heart. Is there any sin you need to confess? Is there a bad attitude or a lack of faithfulness? But then turn your eyes toward Jesus and all that you are in Him.

B. Fixing our eyes on Jesus requires trusting all that He is for us.

Paul often refers to our being “in Christ.” Baptism pictures the fact that we are totally identified with Him in His death, burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). When Satan tempts us with guilt over past sins, we take refuge in Christ’s shed blood (Eph. 1:7). All of God’s promises are yes in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). We are even seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:20)! Focus on these truths by faith!

C. Fixing our eyes on Jesus means trusting Him when sinners wrong us.

The author tells us to “consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself.” *Consider* (used only here in the N.T.) means to calculate. Just as Jesus balanced the joy set before Him against the cross, so we must consider the fact that the more committed we are to Jesus, the more those who oppose Him will

oppose us, no matter how nice we try to be (John 15:20). But we calculate that the joy of knowing and obeying Jesus is greater than all of the rejection, anger, ridicule, or anything worse that we might have to bear for His sake.

D. Fixing our eyes on Jesus is the key to not grow weary and lose heart.

The literal rendering is, “that you not fail through weariness, fainting in your souls.” Spiritual failure happens gradually from continuous weakening (B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 398). Just as a runner who is not in excellent condition gradually slows down and finally collapses, so the believer who does not keep looking with faith to Jesus will eventually collapse. We call it “burn out” today, and it seems that there are many who are weary in their souls in the Christian marathon. The remedy is to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Conclusion

If you're weary in the race, maybe you need to cast off some encumbrances or entangling sins. Someone has pointed out that gold is just as heavy a weight as lead. If you're trying to carry the world's treasures while you run the race of faith, you're going to get tired. Throw off whatever hinders your growth in godliness.

Perhaps you're grumbling about the course that God has set for you. You look at others who are putting foreign armies to flight and receiving back their dead by resurrection, but you're wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground (11:34-35, 38). You think, “It's not fair!” You need to submit to the sovereign hand of God, who sets different courses for His children according to His purpose.

Perhaps you need to refocus on Jesus and the joy of receiving the crown of righteousness that He has promised to all who finish the course (2 Tim. 4:7, 8).

You can't run the race if you've never entered it. If you've never put your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you aren't even in the race. If you don't enter the race and run with endurance, you won't get the prize.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we find the balance between our effort to run the race and God's power working through us (see Phil. 2:12-13).
2. What are some spiritual encumbrances in your life that are not necessarily sin, but they keep you from running well?
3. Is burn out sin? How can it be avoided?
4. Where is the balance between self-evaluation and looking to Jesus? How can we know if we're out of balance here?

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