

“RUNNING THE RACE”

Hebrews 12:1-3

The Letter of Hebrews was first sent to Jewish Christians who, after coming to faith in Christ, experienced severe persecution. As the persecution increased, so did their doubts about Christianity. “Why follow Jesus,” they wondered, “if the following leads to heartache and hardship?”

In simple terms, the first readers of Hebrews were in danger of giving up. Giving up on faith. Giving up on Christ. Giving up on ministry. Giving up on God’s promises. Giving up on each other. Giving up on church; as stated in Hebrews 10:25, **“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.”**

Understanding the dangers of giving up, the author of Hebrews wrote a letter to these Christians; a letter solemn in its warnings, but also rich in its encouragements: Don’t give up! “Don’t let go! Don’t turn back! In a real sense, the theme of Hebrews is all about moving forward in faith. And so we find such forward-looking exhortations throughout the epistle as **“enter,”** 4:1; **“come boldly,”** 4:16; **“go in,”** 6:1; **“show diligence,”** 6:11; **“lay hold,”** 6:18; **“draw near,”** 10:22; **“spur on,”** 10:24; **“persevere,”** 10:36; **“make every effort,”** 12:14; and **“keep on,”** 13:1.

Indeed, the Letter to the Hebrews virtually hums with such encouragements, until it reaches the loud crescendo of **“by faith”** of Hebrews 11 and the cheering **“cloud of witnesses”** of Hebrews 12. In today’s text, Hebrews 12:1-3, the author summarizes much of what he has previously said about moving forward in faith. He does this using the analogy of a long-distance race.

Of course, comparing the Christian life to a race is by no means unique to Hebrews. The apostle Paul used this analogy frequently in his epistles. For example, he wrote in Galatians 5:7, **“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?”** He wrote in Philippians 3:13-14, **“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** And he wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:24. **“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.”**

Everyone who has run a race on the playground; or participated in track and field events at school; or watched Olympic competition on TV; can understand the parallels between running an ordinary race and running the Christian race of faith. Both races have a start and finish. Both races require strict training, practice, and focus. Both races offer a prize.

But here the similarities end. In the race of faith, there are no time-outs. The race of faith goes on until the end of life. This is what makes the Christian race a long-

distance race. In the race of faith, we compete against ourselves—our own sinfulness and foolishness and weakness; not against other runners. In the race of faith, the goal is not to place first, second, or third, but simply to cross the finish line as believers in Jesus Christ; as Paul noted in that passage from 2 Timothy 4: **“I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”**

In the race of faith, the objective is not to win the prize; rather, the objective is not to lose the prize which God has already won and has waiting for us—an eternal, imperishable, incorruptible prize that is far more glorious than we can even imagine. And the race of faith is always a marathon, not a sprint; a marathon with ups and downs, peaks and valleys, successes and failures.

Therefore, this race, the Christian race, requires perseverance and stamina and determination. Do you and I have this type of endurance? We may not be suffering from severe persecution, as the first readers of Hebrews were. Yet, there are many other obstacles and burdens in life that can weary us and worry us and make us ask the same dismal questions the Hebrew Christians were asking: “Why go on? What’s the use? Who cares?”

Problems like a troubled marriage: “I can’t go on.” Problems like a lingering illness: “I can’t take this anymore.” Problems like a dead-end job or financial ruin or difficult ministry: “Forget this. I’ve had enough.” Or problems like those often experienced in a Christian congregation: declining membership; limited budget; small attendance; one disappointment after another.

Are we so different from the first readers of Hebrews? We may not say this out loud or even admit it to ourselves; but haven’t there been dark times when we all have wanted to give up on God; when we have all wanted to give up on an answer to prayer or the solution to a troubled marriage; when we have all wanted—as clearly warned against in Hebrews 10:25—to give up meeting together? Why bother? Who cares? What difference does it make? Yes, why not give up? I will tell you why.

Giving up may be the understandable way. Giving up may be the human way. Giving up may be the expected way. But my dear friends in Christ, giving up is not God’s way; is not the Christian way; and is not the way of faith. For God’s own words on the matter, see Hebrews 10:19-22, **“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.”**

Or read Hebrews 10:35, where the writer states: **“So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.”** In other words,

if we hold on, if we persevere, we will witness the work of Almighty God in our lives, in our relationships, in our ministry, and in our church.

This is what Scripture says. Do we believe it? Are we acting as if we believe it? Or by our words and actions, sighs and moans, murmurings and gestures, are we demonstrating a lack of confidence in the Lord? Are we surrendering to His will or surrendering to our problems?

Where, then, do we find perseverance to run the Christian race? Based on today's text, let me offer five brief considerations.

First, if you feel like giving up on the race of faith, consider how grateful you should be that you are running this race at all. Imagine two members of the Olympic Committee coming to your home today after church. "Yes?" you say, opening the front door. They explain who they are, then say, "We have a proposition for you." You say, "What's that?" They say, "One of our long distance runners at the next Olympics has left the competition. And out of 300 million other U.S. citizens, we've selected you to take his place."

How would you feel? Of course, honored at first. But then unworthy. Then completely inadequate. "After all," you tell the Olympic Committee, "I'm not as young or fast as I used to be. I've packed on a few extra pounds. Frankly, I've never run a competitive race. In fact, the only running I've done recently has been running to IGA for groceries; running to Smith's Drugs for medication; and running to the refrigerator for more snacks." I don't expect to see the Olympic Committee at my home any time soon. Do you?

In a far greater way, none of us were personally qualified to run the Christian race. God did not choose us to run the race of faith because we were talented, fast, strong, light on our feet, holy, blameless, full of good works, or worthy of His calling. In fact, until that calling to faith, the only spiritual running we were doing was running in the wrong direction, away from God—like the dead-end race described in Isaiah 53: **"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."**

If we are suffering in any way because of our Christian faith, have we ever stopped to consider how blessed we are to have the gift of faith; how blessed we are to suffer ridicule and hardship for the sake of Christ? Paul wrote in Philippians 1:29, **"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also suffer for Him."**

Second, when you feel like giving up on the race of faith, consider that the course you're running has been "marked out" by God Himself. The Greek phrase in Hebrews 12:1 is more literally 'let us go on running the race being laid out before us.' Present tense. Ongoing action. And I find this blessed reality—the reality that God is always customizing the course of my life to suit my daily and eternal needs, increase

my faith, and get me safely across the finish line between time and eternity—enormously comforting.

While the beginning, ending, and nature of the Christian race is the same for every believer, the specific course each of us runs is unique. Notice, I said unique, not haphazard. Some Christian races have more obstacles than others; more ups and downs. Not long ago, a friend told me: “I just can’t believe how many things are going wrong with my health.”

Yes, I hear you. I understand. Some of you have heard me talk about the worst experiences of my life—for example, how in 1997, within the space of two weeks, I lost my job, totaled my car, received word of an impending IRS audit, and learned that my soon-to-be ex-wife had filed for divorce. I was in agony.

Would it surprise you to learn that the Greek word for race is AGON; and that AGON is the source of our English word “agony”? Sometimes we get hurt in this race. The obstacles hurt. The hurdles hurt, The running hurts. The training hurts. But as any Olympic athlete will tell you, you cannot build muscle without tearing it down. You can’t get stronger without lifting weights. God has His gymnasium too, where He strips away our self-righteousness and self-reliance and **“the sin that so easily entangles,”** Hebrews 12:1, often by making us lift heavy weight.; a gymnasium where God teaches us to rely solely on Jesus Christ.

The problems we encounter in life can be dreadful and painful. Some we admittedly bring upon ourselves—the result of our own foolish wanderings and poor choices. Yet, whatever the course of your Christian race, doesn’t it comfort and embolden you to know that every obstacle is under the complete control, direction, determination, and dominion of your loving God?

Third, when you feel like giving up on the race of faith, consider the many examples of ‘moving forward by faith’ in Scripture. The first word of today’s text, **“therefore,”** points back to the long list of biblical characters in Hebrews 11: Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Samson, and many others.

Are you growing weary waiting for God to keep a promise? Abraham waited for twenty years for Isaac. Are you troubled by the time it is taking to build a larger congregation or stronger marriage? Noah spent forty years building the ark. People laughed at him too. Do you feel ‘trapped’ by circumstances in life? Joseph spent two years in prison; not because he did something wrong, but because he chose that which was right. And he became a ruler in Egypt.

When you tire in your Christian race, open your Bible and read the histories of these people of God; their tragedies and their triumphs. Each overcame by faith. Think of them as the writer of Hebrews described them: a vast cloud of witnesses (not spectators) filling an Olympic stadium, and cheering you on as you run your Christian

race. Listen carefully to their chant as you undertake that difficult job or share that Christian witness or say “no” to that temptation or lie in that hospital bed. They’re not saying “Go! Go! Go!” They’re saying, “By faith! By faith! By faith!”

Fourth, when you feel like giving up on the race of faith, remember to keep your eyes on the goal. Over my life, I’ve played many competitive sports. And in every sport every coach has said the same: “Don’t take your eyes off the goal, Mark.” Haven’t you heard this? Isn’t the coach telling the truth? The sport I played most in high school and college was basketball. Many mechanics are involved, but none matter if your eyes are not on the right basket.

I learned this lesson the hard way when a sophomore at Immanuel Lutheran High School in Eau Claire, WI. At the time, I was still on the junior varsity team. But for some reason, either because we were so far ahead, or more likely, because we were so far behind, Coach Ron Roehl put me into the varsity lineup.

I was elated, and almost instantly stole the ball from an opposing team member. Okay, the truth is, the guy lost the ball and it bounced into my arms. But I held on to it. My moment of Olympic Glory had come. I raced the entire length of the court and laid the ball perfectly into the basket. Turning, I raised my fists in victory. I shouted. I smiled at the cheering crowd, until I realized that the crowd was cheering because I shot the ball into the opposing team’s basket. I scored two points for the other team.

Keep your eyes on the goal. And that goal is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. This is what—no, He is what makes our momentary setbacks and problems not worth comparing with the glory to come.

Fifth and finally, when you feel like giving up on the race of faith, consider Jesus. Actually, the Greek verb A-PHOR-AO, is a much stronger expression than the “looking unto Jesus” of the NKJV or even the “let us fix our eyes on Jesus” of the NIV. As one Greek scholar put it, A-PHOR-AO means to take our eyes off of everything else—our burdens, our worries, our disappointments, our problems—in order to focus exclusively on Jesus. Why is this so important?

When we tell ourselves, “Look what Jesus endured,” His example, His cross, and His victory certainly help us endure our own trials and troubles. This is meant to happen, as we read in Hebrews 12:2-3, “**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**”

But there is more to the encouragement than this. It’s not only important to remember *what* Jesus suffered, but *why* Jesus suffered. He suffered for our sakes. When we remember the cross and shame Jesus scorned to redeem us, we will never doubt His

understanding of our pains and sorrows; never doubt His ability to keep our faith strong and our salvation safe; never doubt His commitment to bring us safely and victoriously across the finish line of our Christian race. For as the **“author and perfecter of our faith,”** Jesus is both the starting block and the finish line.

Have you heard the name “Derek Redmond”? Redmond was a talented British athlete whose career was frequently marred by injury. During the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Redmond tore his hamstring muscle while competing in the 400-meter semifinal. He collapsed on the track, clutching his leg. But before the medical personnel could reach him, Redmond struggled to his feet and began to limp around the track. Before long, his father Jim hurried from the stadium seats and joined him.

Jim Redmond pleaded with his son to stop walking; but the young athlete would not listen. He refused to stop; refused to give up. “Well then,” said the father, “we’re going to finish this race together.” And finish it they did. And when they finally crossed the finish line—the injured runner now in visible agony, with tears streaking down his face—they did so to a standing ovation.

Despite all the problems, all the pain, all the weariness you may be experiencing in your life today, this is what your heavenly Father is saying to you: “My child, we will finish this race together.”