

“Running the Race”

Text: Hebrews 12:1-4

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Story/Illustration: In high school, I ran several years of track. At the end of each season, there was a conference meet – a big gathering of schools racing against each other to see who the best was in the area. I came prepared to run on a rubber track, wearing my Nike Air Jasaris, light shoes with hard plastic soles and metal spikes. The meet got moved last-minute to a concrete track.

1. Running on concrete with hard plastic soles is torturous. The race I ran that day was absolutely long and painful, even though we did respectfully well in the meet.
2. For 2 weeks following the race, I had massive bruises on my feet from the race.
3. The Christian life is just like this race – it is long, difficult, painful, and often can leave us weary and broken.

Proposition: By the urging of Scripture, we are to strive in the Christian marathon.

Background/Authorship: The Book of Hebrews is the only book in the canon of the New Testament that does not have an authorship that is considered confidently-known.

1. Some options: Paul, or one of his companions such as Barnabas, Silas, Priscilla and Aquila, or Apollos, or perhaps an unknown follower of our Lord (Koester 42-46).
2. What we know: The Holy Spirit inspired this work, and thus, He speaks to us through Hebrews even today.
3. Much of the book’s message focuses on the dangers of apostasy, and though Hebrews is an encouraging message, it is a warning for its readers to avoid falling away from God. This passage follows this theme.

Transition: In Hebrews 12:1-4, the Holy Spirit through the author tells us that we are to strive in the Christian marathon by running the race with perseverance!

Running the Race (1-4)

Text...

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,

12:2 *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.*

12:3 *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*

12:4 *In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

A. Let us run the race since we are surrounded by witnesses (1).

Context: Hebrews 12 comes right after the 'Faith Hall-of-Fame' or '*Hall of Faith*' in Hebrews 11. In Hebrews 11, there are many saints mentioned – Abraham, Joseph, Rahab, David, and many others. This passage is the resolution of the entire of chapter 11 (note the '*so then*' at the beginning of the section). Since these people have walked faithfully in the past, we ought to be encouraged and inspired.

1. Let us cast off the weight that burdens us (1).

Illustration: Though we are commanded to endure hardship as good soldiers of Christ Jesus by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:3, we do not have to run the race with heavy amounts of gear! Over time, the US Army has made its gear lighter, though still, according to a soldier in the US Army going through Basic Training, the weight is still burdensome.

a. **Quote:** "My armor weighs over 20 lbs, add to that my weapon, ammunition, 3 liters of water, Combat Life Saver equipment, etc and I am approaching 200 lbs. I weigh 150 normally. Eventually, the soldier will slow down and be easier to hit" (Sergeant TJ)

b. **Comparison:** The burdens in our lives can also parallel 'body fat' or even 'clothing' in athletics – the author is urging the reader to cast off everything weighing us down (Craddock 148), though I would not encourage running a marathon naked here in America!

c. **Challenge:** We are to cast off anything that besets us in this race, whether burden or sin. What baggage are you carrying that hinders you from seeking the Lord? Cast it off! Wouldn't you rather take on the Lord's easy burden?

Related Text: Matthew 11:28-30

28 *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

29 *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

30 *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

2. Let us cast off the sin that entangles us (1).

a. We are no longer slaves of sin, but of righteousness

Related Text: Romans 6:17-18

17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,

18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

b. Why is there no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus?

Relates Text: Romans 8:1-2

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

c. **Challenge:** We are no longer slaves of sin, so let's strive toward righteousness and holiness.

3. Let us run with perseverance (1).

a. The Christian life is usually a marathon, not a sprint! We are to run with perseverance, not necessarily the fastest of speed!

Illustration: In various races, there may be a runner known as a 'rabbit.' This runner would run the first portion of the race at a very fast pace. After that lap or portion of the race, he would drop out. We are not to be rabbits in the Christian marathon!

b. Good marathons require us to pace ourselves, and in this Christian marathon, we must run as the Lord leads and strengthens us.

Application: Pace yourself in this Christian marathon according to the Lord's timing.

c. Often we go through trials and struggles, and they do develop us. When they are ailments, the Lord does often heal us to show His miraculous healing power! It is good to seek that healing from the Lord (ask, seek, knock!). However, the Lord often allows our physical struggles so that we can rely on His sustaining power. Even Paul had a likely-physical issue ('thorn in his flesh', possibly an eye problem, see Galatians 4:13-15), and the Lord would not heal him immediately:

2 Corinthians 12:9

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Application: In the good and the bad, persevere in this marathon!

B. Let us run the race since Jesus endured ultimate suffering (2-4).

Illustration: Biographies can inspire. Jesus' biography ought to really inspire. Jesus is both the founder and perfecter (author and finisher) of our faith – the subject of our faith, and the fulfiller of our faith. He is the center of our faith, as He finished His marathon here by dying on the Cross for our sins, later resurrecting since the grave could not hold Him (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:54-57)!

1. Jesus endured the Cross of shame (2).

a. Jesus endured shame on the way to His Crucifixion.

Illustration: Before Jesus was nailed to the Cross, bleeding and dying for us, Jesus was whipped, beaten, spit upon, insulted, had a crown of thorns placed upon His head – all undeserved, but for our sake and in our place (cf. Matthew 27:26-44, 49).

b. Death on a cross was painful and humiliating.

(1) He became a curse for us:

Galatians 3:13-14

13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"--

14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

(2) His physical pain was excruciating, but He endured this all to do the Will of the Father (Luke 22:42).

2. Jesus' example (and presence) allows us not to grow weary and faint (3).

a. Jesus was tempted in every way as we were, yet without sin – therefore, we can boldly approach His throne of grace (cf. Hebrews 4:14-16)!

b. Even when we do sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sin and to cleanse us of our unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

c. We have the example of His forgiveness in our lives, and thus we need to forgive others in the same way in this marathon (Colossians 3:12-13).

3. Jesus shed His Blood in striving against sin (4).

a. **Illustration:** Excerpts from *On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ*, an article from the Journal of the American Medical Association (Edwards et al.).

(1) The severe scourging, with its intense pain and appreciable blood loss, most probably left Jesus in a preshock state. Moreover, hematidrosis had rendered his skin particularly tender. The physical and mental abuse meted out by the Jews and the Romans, as well as the lack of food, water, and sleep, also contributed to his generally weakened state. Therefore, even before the actual crucifixion, Jesus' physical condition was at least serious and possibly critical.

(2) Concerning the nail: The driven nail would crush or sever the rather large sensorimotor median nerve. The stimulated nerve would produce excruciating bolts of fiery pain in both arms. Although the severed median nerve would result in paralysis of a portion of the hand, ischemic contractures and impalement of various ligaments by the iron spike might produce a clawlike grasp.

(3) The soldiers and the civilian crowd taunted Jesus throughout the crucifixion ordeal, and the soldiers cast lots for his clothing. Christ spoke seven times from the cross. Since speech occurs during exhalation, these short, terse utterances must have been particularly difficult and painful. At about 3 PM that Friday, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, bowed his head, and died. The Roman soldiers and onlookers recognized his moment of death.

Challenge: What torture Jesus went through in His marathon. Look at His undeserved grief that He underwent for us, and let us be thankful and encouraged for His gift to us, suffering and dying in our place. We have power through His shed blood – protection from the enemy, healing, and most poignantly, forgiveness of sins and salvation (cf. Revelation 1:5, Ephesians 1:7, Isaiah 53:5).

b. **Application:** Since we have not yet reached martyrdom and still can run the race, let's keep striving in this Christian marathon, and let's look to Jesus as our strength and for our strength while we run.

Encouragements & Applications

1. Don't grow weary in this Christian marathon!
2. Pace yourself – the Christian marathon is not a sprint!
3. Look to Jesus as our example and strength through this tough course!
4. Since we are still in the race, let us steadily run for the glory of God, focusing on the author and completer of our faith, Jesus Christ.

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