

Running the Race of Faith

Our New Testament reading is from Hebrews 12:1-3. Last Sunday we looked at the ending of Hebrews 11, considering God's Hall of Faith Fame, and how we are candidates for induction. It's unfortunate there's a chapter division between chapters 11 and 12, since the writer is now challenging the church to become God's heroes by running the race of faith. He begins with "Therefore," giving what should be our response to these examples of faith heroes. Follow as I read **Hebrews 12:1-3**:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Both the unknown writer of Hebrews and also the Apostle Paul would have enjoyed what we were privileged to witness these past two weeks—the 2016 Olympic Games from Brazil. They were fond of using imagery from their world of sports, particularly the sport of distance running. Both compared the life of following Christ as a race to be run, faithfully and to the finish, with an eye of the eternal prize God will award his faithful champions (e.g. 2 Timothy 4:7).

Like Paul and the writer of Hebrews must have, I enjoy watching runners in various races. Running has never been my specialty in sports, but in God's kingdom, each one of us, regardless of age or physical ability, is called to run in the race of faith, as we have read in our text. In fact, we're in the race, whether we like it or not, and will either run well and finish the race, or will begin to falter and fail to finish. Since we're in God's race of faith, we might as well run to win and even run in such a way as to gain the prize God awards his faithful runners.

Our scripture text tells us that in order to run well and successfully, we need inspiration. We find ourselves in a great stadium or coliseum, surrounded by a huge crowd of spectators. The Apostle Paul would have said that the reason we're in the race of faith to begin with is by God's initiative, taking hold of us by his love and grace, and putting us into this race, where we're surrounded by a host of cheering spectators (Phil.3:12).

I love the thrill of being in a crowded football stadium when the home team comes running onto the field, such as at a Badger game. I always enjoyed the same kind of experience as a boy attending Ohio State games. (When I played college football, I had to settle for playing in front of much smaller crowds, with far less pageantry!). But our text is picturing a very inspiring venue, with a great crowd of spectators. In a football or Olympics stadium, most in the crowd have never played the particular sport, but are simply interested. But in the picture in our scripture, all the spectators are fellow participants, or are God's heroes of faith, whom we saw described in chapter 11. Many of those who surround and encourage us are even those who have been martyred for their faith (speaking of leaving it all on the field!).

In some way, those who are cheering us on and providing encouragement and inspiration are the ones who have gone through the same trials and struggles we're all dealing with now. They're not like the people in the stands cheering and booing and yelling at the referees, and doing so without any real knowledge of the game. Rather, they're the ones who understand us, and we're encouraged simply by their presence in the stands, like our Olympic athletes were encouraged when they looked into the stands and saw family, friends, coaches and former champions cheering for them.

We have rooting for us, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and today's faithful, godly people. Most importantly, we have the Lord Jesus, whom Hebrews describes as our faithful High Priest, who understands and sympathizes and assists, because he's gone through every conceivable form of challenge, temptation and test, and is always willing to help us.

In the women's 5,000 meter Olympic race, two runners, Abbey D'Agostino of the USA and Nikki Hamblin of New Zealand, tripped up each other and fell toward the end of the race. Abbey, though sustaining an injury requiring surgery, assisted Nikki and urged her to finish the race, which she did as a qualifier for the final. Abbey testified that God had prepared her for that moment when she reacted instinctively to assist Nikki. She said God was more concerned about her conduct than about winning a medal, and so she knew what to do—help another runner.

That's the kind of encouragement and assistance we have from our Lord Jesus, who gave himself to help us cross the finish line of faith. He inspires and he prepares us. Running the race of faith requires also preparation.

For us, preparation involves casting off all restraints. This may refer to runners who train using weights, but at race time take off all weights.

I saw a video clip of the world's fastest runner, Usain Bolt, training by running with a large cement block attached to him. How absurd to imagine him running his 100 meter dash, pulling that heavy weight! How absurd for us, the text tells us, to not shed

anything that would weigh us down, things that God wants to take from us, such as unforgiven sin, broken relationships, and lingering doubts and guilt that certainly would weigh us down in the life of faith.

There are factors in our lives that in themselves are morally neutral, but nevertheless should be discarded because they simply weigh us down. All of us have certain time wasters and even relationships that drain us rather than encourage us, even though there is nothing inherently evil or apparently sinful about them. But taken together, these factors hinder our spiritual growth or our usefulness in kingdom living and serving.

A biblical picture is of young David, preparing to face the giant Goliath, and refusing to wear Saul's armor. It was excellent armor, but would have been an encumbrance rather than an asset. It was heavy, awkward and not a good fit. So there are some activities and even people in our way who are not a good fit for our kingdom living and serving. These things, activities and people may even be a good fit for someone else, but for us would be more of a liability than an asset. For us, these are time wasters and energy sappers. What God has for us is a life that receives energy as well as expends it, that allows for adequate rest and renewal of strength. You and I know people who drain us and also those who energize us.

There are sins that we need to cast off (1). Sin is whatever comes between us and God, that violates our trust relationship with God, that is self-centered rather than God-centered, that is not of love and concern for others, self-indulging rather than self-giving. Paul was concerned that he not practice what he preached, that he not disqualify himself for the race, as did many athletes from the Russian Federation, who were disqualified from Olympic competition because of their use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs (1 Cor. 9:27).

Regardless of how long we've been running in the race of faith, we'll always be in training, getting ready for the next contest and event. We need to pay the price of staying in spiritual shape and being ready for the next challenge that lies before us. Believe me, I know how easy it is to get out of shape and the long road of getting back into shape! The best way is to keep in shape, and always be ready to face the next challenge, to get back in the next race.

I was impressed by the female gymnast from Uzbekistan who was competing against young girls who were younger than this lady's children! She was able to stay in shape and keep competing because of constant preparation and training, such as we should do spiritually (1 Tim. 4:7b). And, just as with this gymnast, we're never too old to stay in the race.

Our Scripture tells us something about concentration. All serious athletes realize the importance of concentrating on giving their best and staying focused. Although the

Olympic champions are surrounded by distracting cameras, reporters and fans, it's obvious they're able to block out anything that keeps them from concentrating on the race.

I remember well several Olympics ago, a race walker, who was required to never have both feet off the ground, which would be deemed as running, lost concentration as she entered the cheering stadium in Sydney, Australia. She was well in the lead, but as she heard the cheering crowd and realized she was about to finish the line as the winner, she leaped with excitement and was thereby disqualified from the race.

How easily we can become distracted and lose our focus on the life of faith, and with just one careless or weak moment succumb to temptation or to the weakness of an unchecked temper. Suddenly we find ourselves disqualified, having lost our influence or a God-given opportunity.

Jerry Bridges (*The Disciplines of Grace*) says the Christ follower must continue to preach the gospel to herself, and like the two wings of an airplane, balance her life with discipline and dependence. We always depend on God for his mercy and grace, yet we must maintain the disciplines of worship, prayer, fellowship and service, with a daily walk with God, living by the Spirit.

In our race of faith, we're to focus on Jesus, our Lord, guide, Friend and supreme example. He's the only perfect one in the stadium of witnesses. We're to focus on learning about Jesus, on seeking the mind and will of Christ.

Greg Boyd, well known pastor and writer, says his daily quiet time consists of spending time reflecting, with classical music in the background, on the crucified Christ. We can't think too much of Jesus, and realizing and remembering what he's done for us and his ineffable love for us, keeps all things else in focus.

Running the race of faith also involves continuation, perseverance. Obviously, our Scripture is referring to a distance race and not a sprint or 100 meter dash. Perseverance is required to become an exceptional athlete, involving daily practice and discipline, even during seasons and stretches of time when no races are won or even run. It's just practice, practice, practice! The life of faith means following and trusting Jesus when nothing seems to be happening for or with us, and our growth seems even non-existent and circumstances may cause us to doubt God's goodness and even his activity in our lives.

The word used in our text for race is "agon," which gave rise to "agonia," the root of our word "agony," or struggle. The race is a contest, even a struggle that involves a certain amount of agony. The life of faith isn't without its moments, even days and years of

pain, suffering and agonizing struggle. Jesus promised we'd share a degree of his suffering, even in our relationships with our closest friends and family members.

It's been said that the easiest parts of a distance race are the beginning and crossing the finish line, both of which are accompanied by the cheering crowd. But it's the middle part, the cheering crowd is a distant memory, and the agony begins to set in.

In my younger, less arthritic days, I enjoyed participating in 10 K races, often referred to as mini-marathons. The serious runners were way ahead, and I was plodding along, hoping to finish respectably. There were moments when I'd ask myself, "What am I doing here? I should find a clump of trees and duck out of the race, and secretly make my way to my car and go home, hoping none of my acquaintances would recognize me.

And that's the way it can be in the race of faith. There will be times we feel like giving up, wondering, "Why did I get into this in the first place? Is this really worth the pain, struggle and disappointment?" The famous Boston Marathon has its Heartbreak Hill, a long incline toward the middle of the race. Maybe you right now are plodding up your Heartbreak Hill, wondering how and if you'll ever finish your race of faith. Maybe you've ducked out of the race, or have stumbled and fallen, and are tempted to quit this race of faith.

The Olympic 10K race was won by UK runner, Mo Farah, who had stumbled and fallen 11 minutes into the race, but who got back up, and continued running and gained a gold medal. Maybe you've stumbled in faith. But you can get back up, looking to Jesus, who suffered and died for you, and who loves you and will restore you to the race. And all get God's gold medal who simply finish the race.

Kent Hughes tells the story of Bill Broadhurst, who in 1981 entered the Pepsi Challenge 10,000-meter race in Omaha, Nebraska. "Surgery ten years earlier for a brain aneurysm had left him paralyzed on his left side. Now, on that misty July morning, he stands with 1,200 lithe men and women at the starting line.

"The gun sounds! The crowd surges forward. Bill throws his stiff left leg forward, pivots on it as his foot hits the ground. His slow plop-plop-plop rhythm seems to mock him as the pack races into the distance. Sweat rolls down his face, pain pierces his ankle, but he keeps going. Some of the runners complete the race in about 30 minutes, but 2 hours and 29 minutes later Bill reaches the finish line. A man approaches from a small group of remaining bystanders. Though exhausted, Bill recognizes him from pictures in the newspaper. He is Bill Rodgers, the famous marathon runner, who then drapes his newly won medal around Bill's neck. Bill Broadhurst's finish was as glorious as that of the world's greatest----though he finished last. Why? Because he ran with perseverance."

The greatest award awaits those who run to win, God's way!

