

RUNNING THE RACE WITH PATIENCE

INTRODUCTION:

- A. A Journey with God is a Distance Race and Not a Sprint.
 - I. Church rolls are crowded with people who “dropped out” because they didn’t understand that the Christian race is a long-distance run. Failed to “count the cost.”
 - a. Matt. 10:22: “And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

I. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS DEPICTED WITH MANY METAPHORS AS RUNNING A RACE.

- A. Gal. 2:2: “And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain.”
- B. Phil. 2:16: “Holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.”
 - I. There are tremendous hurdles in running the race.
 - a. The Hurdle of Conformity.
 - (1) Everything is Different:
 - (I) Values.
 - (II) Attitudes.
 - (III) Priorities.
 - (IV) Activities.
 - (V) Relationships.
 - (2) The Master wants sweeping changes in our lives:

Gerald Mann has well written: “The Sermon on the Mount makes us nervous because its teachings are X-rated - in the sense that the Christian world has never dared to take them

seriously. Christians have constantly pawned them off as dated, impractical, and idealistic. Instead of using them to change culture, we have allowed culture to change them. And the result is that we have yet to catch up with the world-transforming power which Jesus proclaimed.”

- (3) God has a unique adventure for every runner. No one else will ever have exactly your relationship with the Father. Your experiences, struggles, thoughts, and personal relationships will be uniquely your own. God never uses a copier to make saints, and He never gives birth to spiritual twins. Each of us has a special race to run.

b. The Hurdle of Insensitivity.

- (1) Must see the hurts and hopes in people’s eyes.

- (I) To rejoice with the parents of new baby and comfort the friend with cancer.

- (II) Our Master was the epitome of sensitivity.

Our frenzied pace keeps us from being sensitive to the needs of those whom we love the most.

- (III) We shall have to do more than attend church or quote Bible passages.

c. The Hurdle of Overfamiliarity.

- (1) Overfamiliarity does breed indifference. If that hurdle is not cleared, the runner falls headlong into boredom.

Judson Edwards writes with keen perception:

“There eventually develops a ‘here-we-go-again’ mentality in the Christian faith. After all, we reach the point where we’ve heard nearly all of the biblical stories and memorized most of the songs in the hymnal. The preacher passionately tells us about the prodigal son lost

in a far country, but we already know the ending to that one, and it doesn't move us anymore. We read "God is Love" from the First Epistle of John, but we've heard that so much it's "old hat." The evangelist urges us to repent, but isn't that what they all say? Because we are familiar with the ways of the church and the message of the Bible, we are lulled to indifference. We know the right answers, and our theology is definitely orthodox, but there is no life in us."

We have many names on the church rolls but little fire in the pews.

- a. Our problem is not that the good news is no longer "good" to us. Our problem is that it's no longer "news" to us! We're not surprised by God anymore!
- (2) We run here and there doing our "spiritual" things - reading the Bible, praying, attending church, teaching Sunday school, going to meetings - but somehow the black crust of familiarity begins to choke out our vitality. Meaning eludes us, and faith slowly disintegrates.

- a. The Master's Way is Simple:

Seek God's Kingdom first.
Deny self.
Love others.
Give Freely.
Pray confidently.
Trust God.

2. WE MUST RUN TO WIN.

- a. 1 Cor. 9:24: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it."

Paul shouted flaming words to the Corinthians:
"Get up, you can do it! Keep running!"

James Fixx in his book *The Complete Book of Running* wrote:

“As a race continues, it’s also easy to find reasons to slow down: the pain is unbearable, you tell yourself; an old injury is acting up; blisters are coming on; it isn’t an important race anyway. Such arguments can sound beguilingly persuasive in the heat of a race. Only later, after you’ve yielded to their spurious plausibility, are you disappointed in yourself. If you’re going to race at all, it’s only sensible to make a maximum effort.”

b. The Corinthians were familiar with races since the Isthmian Games were held every few years in Corinth. The Corinthians had watched many races and had thrilled to the exploits of numerous runners. It is no surprise, then, that Paul used their knowledge of running in his motivational plea to them.

c. Running to Win requires:

(1) Discipline.

(a) 1 Cor. 9:25: “And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.”

(b) Ours is the age of Superficiality - Easy Living. No discipline.

“Television commercials extoll the virtues of ‘light’ beer, ‘light’ cola, ‘light’ music. ‘Light’ is definitely ‘in’ these days and is far more alluring than ‘heavy.’ Everything from our cola to our commitment is ‘light.’ But I fear we are also becoming ‘light,’ people with no depth. The antidote is DISCIPLINE.

(2) Must Run in the Right Direction.

(a) 1 Cor. 9:26: “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.”

- (b) He wasn't shadowboxing his way through life, futilely flailing at the wind. There was purpose in how he spent his days.

Listen to Judson Edwards:

“The Greek word for sin in the New Testament literally means ‘to miss the mark.’ If sin is ‘missing the mark,’ surely the ultimate sin must be having no mark to aim for! ... Anyone who will really make a difference for Christ must have discipline hitched to definite direction ... Many people seem to lack this direction. There is no target for their time, no discernible path for their lives.

- c. Paul found his life-consuming passion in Christ.

- (I) Phil. 1:21: “For me to live is Christ... .”

Note: When Paul penned these words, Nero was the Roman Emperor, Seneca the great philosopher, Paul, the prisoner for Christ. Ironically, it is the solitary voice from the Roman prison that we hear best. The emperor and philosopher have faded into time, their influence almost non-existent.

- (II) The Corinthian Christians:

Were not flighty wanderers, nibbling at the world's enticements.

They were runners pressing resolutely.

Boxers taking dead aim at the opponent.

(3) Willing to be a Pacemaker.

a. 1 Cor. 9:27: “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

(1) His discipline and direction were to enable him to practice what he preached.

b. J. Wallace Hamilton well wrote:

“Whether it’s in the little church at the crossroads or the mission field in Africa or the downtown church in the great secular city, here is the key to the human heart: a touch of God in the human life that makes it radiant; until other people want what the Christian has found.”

(4) Move to the Front and Blaze a Trail.

“However humble a place I may hold
Or lowly the paths I trod,
There’s a child who bases his faith on me,
There’s a dog who thinks I am God.

Lord, keep me worthy, Lord, keep me clean,
And fearless and unbeguiled.
Lest I lose caste in the sight of the dog,
And the wide clear eyes of the child.

Let there come in the years to be
The blight of a withering grief,
And a little dog mourn for a fallen god,
And a child for his lost belief.

C.F. Davis

The Christian race is fraught with hazards. No one breezes through the course trouble-free.

(5) Eugene Peterson tells of visiting an unhappy member of his congregation:

“As I entered a home to make a pastoral visit, the person I came to see was sitting at a

window embroidering a piece of cloth held taut over an oval hoop. She said, 'Preacher, while waiting for you to come, I realized what's wrong with me -- I don't have a frame. My feelings, my thoughts, my activities - everything is loose and sloppy. There is no border to my life. I never know where I am. I need a frame for my life like this one I have for my embroidery.'

3. RUNNING AGAINST TIME:

a. Greeks had two words for time:

(1) Chronos: It is time for the party. (Quantity)

(2) Kairos: I had the time of my life. (Quality)

George Sheehan captured this: "The fight, then, is never with age; it is with boredom, with routing, with the danger of not living at all. Then life will stop, growth will cease, learning will come to an end. You no longer become who you are. You begin to kill time or live it without thought or purpose."

II. IF WE ARE TO WIN THE RACE, WE MUST STRIP DOWN TO THE ESSENTIALS:

A. Hebrews 12:1-2: "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

1. Don't Take on the Trappings of the World:

"Show me a runner who looks fancy - new shoes, expensive garb, complicated watch - and I will show you a runner I can probably beat. Show me a runner who looks like a garage-sale refugee - dilapidated shoes, faded shorts, gaunt as a buzzard - and I will show you a runner who will be through and sipping a soft drink when I finish."

a. Gal. 5:7: "You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?"

- (1) Millions have fallen out of the race. Falling out of the race can come from traumatic experiences: a divorce, a death, or a betrayal by a Christian friend. It can be prompted by the gnawing fingers of doubt that threaten to squeeze our certitude. It can come upon us as the depression of old age or loneliness.”

The Christian life is not for settlers, but for pioneers.

2. We Must Lay Aside the Sins Which Have Weighted Us Down.

- a. We cannot run well with the large swaying garment of sin which enmeshes us and causes us to fall.

Besetting Sins: Omission
Lust for another woman or man
Lying
Social drinking at the lounge
Weighted by sins of yesteryears.

- b. Remember that our Master finished the race as well as Old Testament Worthies and they are now on the sidelines urging us to persevere - not to give up - not to quit.

III. KEEP RUNNING EVEN WHEN LIFE HAS BACKED YOU INTO A CORNER.

- A. Phil 3:12-14: “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

1. When the Race to Heaven Gets Tough - You Get Tough With It:

- a. Paul is an example:

“When Paul wrote the book of Philippians, life had backed him into a corner - literally. He was in prison - probably in Rome - and facing persecution. He was not a young man and had already been knocked

around by life ... It was late in the race, the pressure was on, and it was time to press on to the finish line. He was living with stress, uncertainty, and having to cope with less than ideal circumstances.”

(1) He writes: I haven't yet reached the goal line.

I haven't yet gotten the victor's wreath.

I am not looking back on past failures.

I am pressing for the mark.

I am going to receive the prize of the high calling for which I am giving my life.

b. He wasn't about to give up the race:

Heb. 10:23: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

2 Cor. 4:1: “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.”

“A person with no future will invariably see the race as ‘forced labor’.”

2. Sheehan in his book *Running and Being* writes:

“Once in the lead, I never look back. There is no greater spur to a tired runner who is about to give up and coast in than seeing this over-the-shoulder distress signal. So I never look back. - I reach for the man in front of me no matter how impossible it seems for me to catch him.”

CRUX: 3. Forgetting What Lies Behind Is Crucial:

a. Forget past sins.

b. Forget past hurts. (See 2 Cor. 11:24-27)

c. Forget past achievements.

- Past sins have been forgiven.
- Remembering past hurts will lead to resentment.
- Forget your achievements - they will destroy your incentive.

“If you would conquer today’s challenges, drop yesterday’s baggage and travel light.”

IV. THE END OF LIFE IS TO FINISH THE RACE AND STAND IN THE WINNER’S CIRCLE.

- A. 2 Tim. 4:7-8: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

Philip Yancey in his book *Where Is God When It Hurts*:

“When I am old, I hope I do not die between sterile sheets, hooked up to a respirator in a germ-free environment. I hope I’m on a tennis court, straining my heart with one last septuagenarian overhead smash, or perhaps huffing and puffing along a trail to Lower Yosemite Falls for one last feel of the spray against my wrinkled cheek.”

Note: Paul didn’t want to “die between sterile sheets” either, and all the way to the end, he was running to win.

1. The Race Is For An Imperishable Crown.
 - a. 1 Cor. 9:25: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”

2. Paul could say at the end of the way:

I fought for and defended the Christian faith.

I never dropped out of the race in spite of obstacles.

I have been faithful to the charge of the Master.

“And what greater sorrow could there be than to “die between sterile sheets,” knowing our lives have been

invested in the insignificant? To die knowing that we have missed our calling and the true purpose of our lives...Our tragedy may be an unused soul, an unfulfilled design.”

CONCLUSION:

1. Run to win.
2. Run against the odds.
3. Run with perseverance.
4. Keep on running until the end of life, finish the course.