

## **Run, Christian, Run!**

A Sermon on Hebrews 12:1-4

[By D. Patrick Ramsey](#)

### **Introduction**

It is the year 2008 and you are in Beijing, China, as part of the USA Olympic team. Upon entering the Olympic stadium, you are awestruck by the electric atmosphere with over 100,000 people in the stands. A boost of adrenaline shoots through your veins. Taking off your warm up suit, you approach the starting line for the 10,000 meter race. The pistol fires and you are off...

The writer to the Hebrews paints a similar picture in Hebrews 12:1-4 as we learn that:

### **You are like a runner in a long distance race.**

A common metaphor for the Christian life in the NT is that of a runner in a race. During the course of his ministry, Paul wrote that he ran the race in such a way as to obtain the prize. That is he disciplined himself and continually pressed forward toward the goal in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 9:24-25; Phil. 3:12-14). At the end of his ministry, he declared that he had fought the good fight, finished the race and had kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7-8). Here in Hebrews 12, the writer employs the same analogy as he writes that we are to run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Notice first that we are to *run*. Athletes in a race do not crawl, sit down or drink a Coke. They run! They exert themselves, giving their undivided attention to the task at hand. The Christian life requires that you exert yourself and work at following Christ. You need to run!

Paul says that we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12); to train ourselves for godliness (1 Tim. 4:7); to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Tim. 6:11).

Growing in Christ and remaining faithful to Him in this life with all of its obstacles, not the least of which is our remaining sin nature after salvation, requires discipline and hard work to overcome. Do not expect to be zapped with knowledge and holiness from heaven so that you automatically know the scriptures and naturally keep them. The fact that God makes you holy by working in you does not detract in the least, the need for you to pursue holiness, work out your salvation or train yourself for godliness.

So, do not be surprised when you find it difficult to trust God; to be patient; to hold your tongue or to extinguish lustful desires. Welcome to the real world of the Christian! Welcome to the race!

Second, we are to run with endurance. The Christian life is not a sprint, but a marathon. Trusting in God and following his son in the power of the Spirit is not a one time event but a life-long endeavor.

Those of you who have done any sort of long distance race know that there can be times when you feel like slowing down, and dropping out. Endurance, perseverance and true grit are required to work through the pain and make it to the end. The same is true for the Christian race. A number of the saints in Hebrews 11 had to endure much suffering during their particular race to glory. The recipients of this letter were struggling. Some were contemplating quitting.

The writer, who is deeply concerned for them, exhorts them to run and to run with endurance. He wants each and every one of them to make it to the finish line. For only those who cross the finish line, inherit the promises. This is why you need to run your race with endurance to the end. It does not matter what you have done in the past. If you drop out now, you will not inherit eternal life, as you will be proving you were never one of God's chosen athletes. It does not matter that you prayed the sinner's prayer, walked down the aisle or asked Jesus into your heart. He who endures to the end will be saved. He who endures till the end proves he was elected to be a runner from the very beginning. So, run and by God's grace run through the pain so that you might receive the crown of life (Rev. 2:10).

Third, we are to run the race that is set before us. In one sense, we are all running the same race. Together we follow the narrow road that leads to the celestial city. Yet, in another sense, we have all been given distinctive courses or trails to run. In chapter 11, we see that Noah's path was to build an Ark, while Abraham had to leave his homeland and sacrifice the son of promise. Some escaped the edge of the sword while others were slain with the sword. Some were delivered from fire and lions while others were tortured and killed. (see, Hebrews 11).

Thus, certain courses are more difficult than others while others may just seem more pleasant than our own (the grass is always greener on the other side). Nevertheless, we are to run the race that God sets before us, whatever it may be.

Sadly, some have found their path too difficult and so quit. This happens many times when a person is ex-communicated. A person is put out of the church, not because they have sinned, but because they refuse to get back up and keep running the race set before them.

In order to avoid dropping out thereby disqualifying yourself:

- 1. Run your race knowing that you can finish it.**

In the middle of a long race, doubt can be a killer. Realizing how far you have to go, the present ache in your body can make finishing seem unlikely. Doubt then quickly transforms itself into certainty and you give up.

So, it is in the Christian life. If you doubt you can make it; if you believe that you just cannot do what the Lord requires of you; then you will find it hard to keep running. I have counseled people who, after surveying the race that had been set before them, concluded that they could not go on. In order to instill biblical hope, I went to numerous passages that spoke of the power of God that is at work in us. One passage I could have used, and perhaps should have used, is Hebrews 11 and 12. For in times of hopelessness, we can and ought to find encouragement and inspiration from the saints who have gone before us.

Indeed, this ultimately was the purpose of chapter 11. In verse 1 the author writes: “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run...”

The imagery here is that of a stadium packed with the saints of Hebrews 11 and others like them who have finished the race triumphantly, while you are down on the track following in their footsteps. The idea, however, is not that they are in heaven looking down on you, cheering you on, but their testimony and witness to the fact that by faith you can most definitely finish the race and receive the prize.

In the NT, the term *witness* does not refer to a passive spectator but to an active participant who confirms and attests to the truth as a confessing witness.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the point is not that the cloud of witnesses is looking at us, but us looking at them and deriving inspiration, courage, hope and strength from their completed races.

During half-time, a coach whose team is losing by a large margin, will remind his players that another team was behind by a greater margin last year, yet they came back to win. The point of course is that a comeback is possible. It can be done! It must be done!

When your race is hard, remember and reflect upon what the saints of the past were able to accomplish and endure by faith. Read and re-read Hebrews 11. Read Church history and Christian biographies. Let their journeys, endurance, and victories inspire and motivate you to press forward and to keep on keeping on. Let them remind you of the faithfulness and power of God. In addition, note that not just a few here or there made it to the end, but a vast number: “a great cloud of witnesses.”

In the middle of our darkest hour of our darkest day, we will be tempted to think that we are utterly alone. No one else has had to suffer what we are suffering. No one else has had to overcome what we have to.

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991), 408.

However, the truth of the matter is that many of the saints of the past, whether in scripture or church history, had to endure much worse. We are not alone in our suffering. As Paul wrote: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man (1 Cor. 10:13)."

If they can make it, we can too because the same God who worked in them, is the same God who works in us. Therefore, in light of the great cloud of witnesses that surround us, let us run with endurance.

## **2. Run your race without any burdens.**

For an athlete to run the race in such a way as to obtain the prize, he has to shed any excess weight by training and diet, and he needs to take off his extra clothing (jacket and pants) before the actual race. Otherwise, his running will be impeded, and his race will be harder than it has to be.

Employing this picture, the writer says in vs. 1 that we are to "lay aside every weight." You need to get rid of whatever makes your race extra hard to run, even if it is good in and of itself. Throw it to the side so that you do not slow down, become discouraged, and quit.

The great and ultimate goal that we strive for is not anything in this life, but in the life to come. We are running to the New Jerusalem, not the earthly Jerusalem. Whatever keeps us from this goal needs to be dealt with and laid aside.

We also have to lay aside the "sin which so easily ensnares us." Some of you may remember two famous women runners in the 1980's: the American, Mary Decker and the South African, Zola Bud. After much hype and anticipation, both women faced each other in the Olympics. Mary Decker was hoping with all the hope in the world to win the gold medal. Moreover, she had a very good chance to do it. However, all of her hopes and dreams came crashing down when she was tripped by Zola Bud in the middle of the race.

Sin is like that. It will make you stumble. Greed pushed Judas down. Love of this world threw Demas off the track. Covetousness tripped up Achan.

Indulging in sin affects our relationship with God, weakens our faith, and pulls us away from the race we are running. If we are going to get back on track, we need to put away the sin.

## **3. Run your race by looking to Jesus.**

My cross-country ski coach taught us to keep our head up and to look ahead when racing, especially when going up a hill. Charging up a steep hill is tough, and it is natural to look down. The problem though is you begin to focus on the pain, and your

forward movement is hindered. By looking up and ahead, you are better able to drive yourself forward up the hill.

As we run our race, we need to look up and ahead to Jesus, the author and finisher of faith. Of all those who have lived by faith and emerged victorious, Jesus is the greatest. He is the example *par excellence* of living by faith. That is the primary meaning of the phrase “author and finisher of faith,” or “pioneer and perfecter” of faith.

Jesus is not only the author or pioneer of our salvation in that by his life, death and resurrection he blazed the trail for us to God. He is also the pioneer and perfecter of faith as he alone lived in full trust and dependence upon God. All of the saints mentioned in chapter 11 had their faults and failures, but Jesus ran the race set before him flawlessly. In so doing, He serves as the example of how we are to run our race and live our life.

And how did Jesus run his race? Verse 2: “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.”

Jesus endured his suffering, and disregarded the shame that accompanied his crucifixion because he kept his eye on the joy that would be his. The present hardship and pain was worth the future reward, which he now enjoys as he has been enthroned on high.

Likewise, we are to keep our eyes focused on our reward, which is to say that we are to keep our eyes on Jesus. For if we follow Jesus and persevere to the end then we shall share in his joy and exaltation. 2 Timothy 2:12 says: “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him.” In addition, Revelation 3:21 says: “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

When you find it hard to keep your head up and looking ahead to Jesus because of the steepness of the hill, take the time to consider the course Jesus had to take (vs. 3). Think and reflect upon the sufferings, hardships, and disgrace that he had to endure at the hands of sinners. Let his example and what he did for you propel you forward up the hill.

For a further boost of energy compare and contrast your race with the Lord’s (vs. 4). Broaden your horizon and evaluate your situation according to his, and you will find that it is not as bad as you once thought.

Therefore, when you fix your eyes on Jesus, you should see your example, your reward and your situation in proper perspective.

## **Conclusion**

It is not the year 2008, but 2007. You are not in Beijing, China, but in London, Kentucky. It is not the start of the race, but the middle of the race.

As the people of God, you are running the race of your life and the prize is no mere gold medal, it is eternal glory. So, run with confidence and endurance. Run without any burdens and keep your head up, looking unto Jesus until you cross the finish line.

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