

Text: Hebrews 12:1-3
 Title: Running the Race of Faith
 Date: May 30, 2010
 Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

As I mentioned at the beginning of the worship time, I'm going to deal with 1 Timothy 6:11-16 next week. But there's a phrase that I want to touch on today as a bridge to what we're going to think about this morning.

Paul wrote to Timothy...

“Fight the good fight of the faith.” 1 Timothy 6:12 (ESV)

But this verse could also be translated as...

“Run the good race of the faith.”¹

In fact, “fighting the good fight” and “running the good race” are really synonyms in Paul's mind and for proof of that you only have to look to the Second Letter to Timothy where he wrote...

“I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” 2 Timothy 4:7

The essence of Paul's counsel to Timothy is that he is to fight his fight, or if you will, run his race, with a view to the fact that he is fighting and running under the watching eye of the King of kings and Lord of lords. This morning what I want us to think about together is **running the race of faith**. How do we run it well? How do we run it to the end? Who's watching and what difference does it make in how we run?

Of all the events at the Olympics, the running races are the ones that draw the largest crowds. It's interesting to note that in the ancient Olympic Games, running races were the only events that were held for many years. In the modern Olympics, the track events attract enormous crowds.

I think it's easy to understand why. Foot races are so basic – everyone can relate to them at some level. Whether you remember races in your school gym class, or friendly contests with brothers or sisters; whether you ran track for a team or run simply for fitness; or whether you ran at the last annual church picnic to reinforce your slumping male ego, everyone can relate to a foot race.

Why does the language of the foot race connect with us so easily? I think it's because the foot race is the picture of a contest stripped to its basic components.

¹ John R.W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 156.

You don't need any athletic equipment to run this race, just your feet; you don't need instruction on how to run in order to run this race, all you need to know you learned as a child; you don't need a prepared playing field to run this race, any street or trail will do; you don't even need an opponent to run this race, you can run it all by yourself. To run a race all you need is yourself and a course to run. It's just you against the course. But in reality, it's just you against you. The course only serves to bring out of us what's inside of us. The race tests your mettle, your courage, your spirit, your resolve.

The Holy Spirit made great use of our connection with foot races. As He moved the writers of the Bible to record God's thoughts for us, He inspired the writers to make use of the picture of a foot race as an analogy for the life of faith. Solomon, the wise king of Israel, wrote that he had observed in life that...

“The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.” Ecclesiastes 9:11 (NIV)

David, the poet king of Israel, wrote about the travels of the sun in the heavens as if it were **“like a champion rejoicing to run his course.” Ps 19:5**

When we come to the New Testament, the apostle Paul demonstrates the influence of the ancient Olympic Games on the world of his day by describing the Christian life in race terms...

“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 competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” 1 Corinthians 9:24-25

And he uses the language that pictures a racer straining toward the finish line to describe the passion of his own life...

“But one thing I do: 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.” Philippians 3:13-14

At various times, Paul checked himself to make sure that he was running the race that God had planned for him to run. At one point in his life, Paul sought the counsel of more experienced Christians, people who had run the race longer than he had, **“for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain.”**

Galatians 2:2

We're all in a race. Whether you are a believer in Jesus Christ or not, we are all in a race, and you probably know it. And there are questions we ask ourselves:

- ❖ **Am I running for the right goal?** At the end of my life, after expending all my effort, am I only going to find that I've been running for the wrong prize?
- ❖ **Am I running well?** Can I make my race easier to run by running better and more wisely?
- ❖ And the most important question of all, **"Am I going to finish?"** How can I make sure that I'll make it to the end?

There's a single word theme for the Book of Hebrews and it's the word, **perseverance**. The little church to which this epistle was originally written was facing all kinds of challenges to their faith and they were being tempted to drop out of the race. Some had already done so; others were seriously thinking about it. Underneath the words of the passage we're about to read this morning we can almost hear the plaintive sound of their voices: **"I can't go on. I don't have the strength for this race. It's too hard to follow Jesus!"**

Have you ever felt like that? Do you feel like that today? The Holy Spirit knew that you would and so he inspired the writer of the Book of Hebrews to give us a spiritual version of a runner's clinic. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the writer of Hebrews comes along like an experienced fellow-runner to give us some great advice on how to persevere in our race. Let's listen to what he has to say to us...

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 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." Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)

I want to break down this fellow runner's advice into four lessons about running our race.

First, we need to realize that we are running surrounded by fellow-runners who encourage us

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses," Hebrews 12:1

We can read this passage with our modern sports mentality and miss what the author is really saying. Last night our family gathered at a restaurant in Red Deer to celebrate our daughter Cathryn's birthday. While we ate, the TVs in the restaurant broadcast two major sports events: the first game of the Stanley Cup finals and the last game of the NBA semi-finals. We were spectators of these

sporting events, together with others in the restaurant and part of a huge crowd of people around North America.

But the race we're in isn't a spectator sport. The witnesses who surround us are not mere spectators, as were in that restaurant. Every one of the witnesses that surround us is a fellow runner – in fact, they are fellow runners who have completed the race. They are the witnesses to enduring faith that we meet in Hebrews chapter 11 among whom are Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jephthah, Barak, David, Samuel and many more – so many witnesses, in fact, that the writer calls them a “cloud of witnesses.” Every one of them has completed the race. The lesson they shout to us from the other side of the finish line is this: **“You can do it! We did it, and so can you!”**

The writer might have pictured these people sitting in the stadium of the Greek games. But when I read the word “**surrounded**” I get a different picture. As we run our race these witnesses form the pack that runs around us. As they see us falter, as they see us weaken, as they see us lose focus, they speak encouragement and challenge to us.

Enoch says to us, “Stay close to God. Feed your relationship by spending time with Him. It will give you strength. It did for me.”

Abraham calls to us, “Don't settle for this world's rewards. Look farther ahead. Look for the city of God! I did and it sustained me.”

Moses shouts to us, “Don't let the fear of man weaken your resolve. Keep running for God and toward God. I did it and so can you.”

If we stumble and fall in our race, and we all do, I picture Barak drawing up close beside us. Barak whispers, “I tripped up in my race, too. I looked stupid for a while but God lifted me and he'll lift you, too. Get up again and stay in the race.”

As witnesses of authentic, enduring faith, they are an encouragement for us; they are our to be our heroes and our examples of enduring faith.

Kent Hughes is a pastor whose work I value. In his seminary days he worked in a factory in Los Angeles and made friends with a law student who also worked there. The man's name was Lawrence King. They would talk about tennis together, bragging to each other about their abilities. Finally one day, they planned a casual tennis match to decide who the better player really was.

As Hughes tells the story, everything was pretty casual in their match until Lawrence's wife showed up and started heckling them from the side lines, commenting on the quality of their play. All of a sudden their “who cares” attitude vanished and their shots became crisper and their focus sharper. Their game

improved dramatically! Why? Simply because King's wife was Billie Jean King, the women's Wimbledon tennis champion! Her presence elevated their game.

Hughes writes, "Golfers, think what would happen to your concentration if Arnold Palmer joined your foursome! Or imagine the adrenaline if while shooting some hoops, Michael Jordan appeared saying, 'Mind if I join you?' Every ounce of 'wanna be' in our mortal bodies would suddenly be on the court! The presence of the pros, the Hall of Famers, is innately elevating." (Kent Hughes, Hebrews vol. 2, p. 157-158)

There are modern day "witnesses" whose stories can elevate us in our race of faith. Look around you as you run. There are fellow runners facing all kinds of challenges who endure and press on. And there are runners with whom we ran for a time but who have completed their race ahead of us. Learn from them; listen to them; be challenged by them. They form a "cloud of witnesses" whose lesson to me and to you is simply this: **"If we can do it, so can you! If we can finish the race, so can you!"**

We don't run alone. We run this race surrounded by a multitude of witnesses.

Second, we need to understand that we run this race best when we run it light

"Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" Hebrews 12:1

Until a chronic injury sidelined me a few years ago I used to run regularly. Over the years of running I've learned from reading books and articles about running, and from sad personal experience, that excess weight translates into slower, harder running. It's estimated that for every pound of excess weight that a runner carries, he or she adds 30 seconds or more to their time in running a mile. Weight slows you down; weight reduces your endurance.

The writer of Hebrews challenges us to run lighter and he talks about two different kinds of weights.

First, he challenges us to get rid of **"everything that hinders."** This isn't necessarily things that we would call "sin." In New Testament times, runners would remove their day to day clothes in order to prepare to run. Today, track runners remove their warm up sweats in order to get rid of anything that might hinder the free movement of their arms and legs. Running requires a particular kind of kit. Jackets and ties for men may be appropriate dress for business but they are hardly appropriate when you're running a race.

John Piper wrote "the race of the Christian life is not ... run well by asking, 'what's wrong with this or that?' but by asking, 'is it in the way of greater faith and greater love and greater purity and greater courage and greater humility and

greater patience and greater self-control? **Not, ‘is it sin?’ But, ‘does it help me run?’**” To young people he said, “Don’t ask about your music, your movies, your parties, your habits: ‘what’s wrong with it?’ Ask, ‘does it help me run the race? Does it help me run for Jesus?’” (John Piper, August 17, 1997, “Running with the Witnesses – Hebrews 11:39-12:2” © [Desiring God Ministries](#), 2005)

Second, he challenges us to get rid of **“the sin that so easily entangles.”**

I read the story of a couple who were picnicking on a small island within sight of the lodge where they were staying. They had rowed out, tied off their rowboat to a tree on the island and had enjoyed an evening supper by campfire. As darkness fell, they packed up and headed back to the lodge in the rowboat, taking their bearings from the lodge lights burning clearly across the water. After rowing for what seemed like hours, the lodge lights were getting no closer and they began to wonder what was going on, until the man’s wife, who happened to be in the stern, noticed the rope trailing behind the boat was tight as a drumhead. They had forgotten to untie themselves from the shore!

Despite all their effort in rowing they had made no progress because they were tied firmly. Sin can act like that in our lives. Unless we loosen ourselves from it, it will impede our spiritual progress. Whatever sin it might be, it “entangles” and trips us up in our race.

A recent survey of *Discipleship Journal* readers ranked areas of greatest spiritual challenge to them. How does this list compare to your experience?

1. **Materialism**
2. **Pride**
3. **Self-centeredness**
4. **Laziness**
5. **(Tie) Anger/Bitterness**
6. **(Tie) Sexual lust.**
7. **Envy**
8. **Gluttony**
9. **Lying** (Citation: *Discipleship Journal*, 11-12/92. "To Verify," *Leadership* © [PreachingToday.com](#) 2005)

If you identify something that is persistently getting in your way, then make it a part of your training for this race to get rid of it. Name it for what it is – sin. Confess it the Lord and ask his forgiveness. Repent of it and develop a positive spiritual habit to replace it, depending upon God’s mercy and power to help you. He will help you to defeat it so that you can run without being tripped up.

What’s holding you back, tripping you up, slowing you down, throwing you off, or sapping your strength? **Sin or no sin, throw it off!**

Third, as we approach this race...

We need to realize that we’re running a marathon, not a sprint!

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Hebrews 12:1

Long-distance running requires endurance. Sprinting requires power. Endurance is developed by repeatedly pressing through difficulties. You approach a marathon in a totally different way than you do a sprint.

The Apostle James tells us...

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” James 1:12

The “crown” James speaks of is the crown given to the winners of the Olympic races. If we want to successfully complete our race, perseverance must be a key component of our race strategy.

It is so important that we understand the kind of race we’re running. If we prepare our minds for the long-haul, we’ll be more ready to press through the difficulties we encounter along the way than if we had our minds set on a short, quick sprint. The Greek word for “**race**” is **agon**. It’s the word from which we derive the English word, “agony.” There is pain in our race and we need to persevere through it.

There is a story attached to the 1968 Olympics which has become legendary – and it’s completely true! “By 7 p.m. on October 20, 1968, at the Mexico City Olympics Stadium, it was beginning to darken. It had cooled down as well.

The last of the Olympic marathon runners were being assisted away to first-aid stations. Over an hour earlier, Mamo Waldi of Ethiopia had charged across the finish line, winning the 26-mile, 385-yard race looking as strong and as vigorous as when he’d started.

As the last few thousand spectators began preparing to leave, they heard police sirens and whistles through the gate entering the stadium.

The attention turned to that gate. A sole figure, wearing the colors of Tanzania, came limping into the stadium. His name was John Steven Aquari. He was the last man to finish the marathon in 1968. His leg was bandaged, bloody. He had taken a bad fall early in the race. Now, it was all he could do to limp his way around the track. The crowd stood and applauded as he completed that last lap.

When he finally crossed the finish line, one man dared ask the question all were wondering. “You are badly injured. Why didn’t you quit? Why didn’t you give up?”

Aquari, with quiet dignity said, **‘My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. My country sent me to finish.’** (Citation: Craig Brian Larson, "Strong to the Finish," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 155. © PreachingToday.com 2005)

God didn't just send us to start this race, he sent us to finish it and the crown goes to those who persevere to the end.

Finally, the most important piece of advice is this...

We run successfully when we run with our eyes on Jesus

“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.” Hebrews 12:2-3

The expression “let us fix our eyes” literally means “to look away from something and toward something else.” In other words, we have to consciously direct our attention away from anything else and fix it on Jesus.

What does the writer of Hebrews want us to see in him?

First, the writer wants us to see **Jesus’ example**. He is the “**author and perfecter**” of the faith. If we want an example of someone who ran his race perfectly, we look at Jesus. If we want to know “what would Jesus do” in our situation, we need to know “what Jesus did” during his race on earth.

Earlier in this letter, the writer referred to the Lord as “**Jesus, who went before us**” **Hebrews 6:20**. The phrase translated “who went before us” is one word in Greek and the NASB translates it as “**forerunner**.” Jesus ran this race of faith perfectly ahead of us and if we want to know how to run it best, we need to look to his example. How did Jesus handle hardship? How did Jesus gain strength for the race? How did Jesus keep his focus? How Jesus ran is how we are to run.

Second, the writer wants us to see **Jesus’ motivation**. Jesus ran his race “**for the joy set before him**.” Jesus is the perfect example of someone who ran his race on the basis of faith. He was motivated by his confidence in what he hoped for and his certainty of what he could not see.

He knew God’s promise was that because of his successful completion of his course – a course that took him through the cross...

“After the suffering of his soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, And he will bear their iniquities.” Isaiah 53:11

As we encounter trials and hardships in our race, we need to keep our eyes on God's promise to us that he has "something better" waiting for us in the "heavenly" city. (Hebrews 11:16, 40)

Third, the writer commands us to "**consider**" **Jesus' endurance**. The word "consider" is a word taken from the world of business where it means "to take account of" and it's a command, not a suggestion. It directs us to carefully consider the facts of Jesus' life and calculate their implication for our own lives. The phrase, "grow weary and lose heart" is an expression used by Greek writers to describe those who collapse either before the end of a race or just after the finish line. In this case, the writer of Hebrews is thinking of the possibility that we might fail to finish. He tells us that we need to consider Jesus' endurance to the end.

Jesus "endured" (v.2) the cross – the most inhumane and vicious form of punishment in the Roman world. He endured a shameful, painful death. And he did it for you and me.

Jesus "endured" (v.3) the mocking and humiliation of those for whom he came to die – of sinful men and women like you and me. He endured rejection and persecution. And he did it for us!

If Jesus would do that for me, what is my calculated response to be when I encounter trouble in my race for him? **Can I abandon Him who endured for me?** The calculation is simple. As missionary to China, C.T. Studd, put so simply...

"If Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him." C.T. Studd

"Joey Lee was in the race of his life—the 150-mile [ultra marathon called] Marathon Des Sables, across the Moroccan Sahara Desert. On day four, Lee was still running, though other runners had already been airlifted out after surrendering to the heat or to physical exhaustion.

About 80 miles into the race, the air pockets in the soles of Lee's running shoes blew out, apparently from the heat. Lee was left with almost nothing to protect the soles of his feet as he ran over the sand and jagged rocks. Although he carried a backpack of provisions, it contained no extra shoes. His feet were blistered, his body exhausted from the 100-degree-plus temperatures. His eyes burned from the sand and sweat.

Facing another 30 miles to run that day and 40 more miles over the next three days, Lee refused to quit. The only sight ahead of him was the miles of desert,

and the massive dunes he would have to overcome, but he pressed on. Three days later, Lee finished the race in the middle of the pack of 600 other runners. Joey Lee was running for a reason. His young wife, Allison, had died almost a year and a half earlier after a long battle with cancer. Lee was running in memory of his wife and to raise money for the American Cancer Society.

Ignoring the mental and physical obstacles he faced, he finished the race. Afterward, when asked what kept him going, he replied, "**I just thought about Allison a lot. This is nothing compared to what she went through.**" *(Citation: Greg Miller, Madison, Mississippi; source: www.clarionledger.com (4-18-04 © PreachingToday.com 2005)*

Whatever trouble we encounter in our race is important to God. It's not "nothing" to him – but it can never equal or surpass what Jesus did for us in dying on the cross!

If we can draw encouragement in our race from the "witness" of Moses, or Abraham, or Barak, just imagine the encouragement you can draw from Jesus as you lock eyes with him. He's standing just across the finish line saying to you, "**You can do it and I can help you!**"

Let me tell you one last running story.

"It was Monday night, August 3, at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. At the track and field stadium, the gun sounded for the 400-meter semifinals. About 100 meters into the race, Britain's Derek Redmond crumpled to the track with a torn right hamstring.

Medical attendants rushed out to assist him, but as they approached Redmond, he waved them all aside, struggled to his feet, and crawled and hopped in a desperate effort to finish the race.

Four years earlier he had also qualified for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea. Ninety seconds before his heat he had to pull out of the Olympics because of Achilles tendon problems. Following that injury, he had five surgeries. Yet somehow he had qualified again for this 1992 Olympics, and he'd just suffered a career-ending injury.

But he said to himself, "I'm not quitting. I'm going to finish this race."

Up in the stands, a big guy wearing a T-shirt, tennis shoes, and a Nike cap that said "Just Do It" across the front barreled out of the stands, hurled aside a security guard, ran to Derek Redmond's side, and embraced him. He was Jim Redmond, Derek's father. ... Arm around his son's waist, Derek's arm around his dad's thick shoulders and neck, they continue down the track.

... The crowd is standing, cheering. Derek and his dad work their way around the track until, finally, arm in arm, they cross the finish line.

If that's the way an earthly father responds to his son who is determined to finish the race no matter what the price, how much more does God, our heavenly Father, run to the side of his son or daughter who says, **"I'm finishing. I don't care how much it hurts. ... I'm finishing."** (Citation: Craig Brian Larson, "Strong to the Finish," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 155. © PreachingToday.com 2005)

“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Hebrews 12:3

*Father, by your grace and for your glory we will run this race of faith to the end!
Amen.*

- **Prayer**
- **Final Song:** By Faith
- **Benediction**