

Running the Race

A few years ago my mother started running marathons. She just decided one day that she was going to begin training for these long runs and since then she now has a few marathon finishes under her belt. She's currently in her early 60s and in the last race she ran she was the oldest participant. And she's not done either. She has another half-marathon scheduled next month. I think she's crazy! And I say that in the most loving way possible. Although I run to stay in shape, I have no desire to push myself to that limit for hours on end, contending with the physical pain and the psychological misery of running 26.2 miles all at once. But so although I think my mom is crazy, I can't help but respect what she does. It's impressive not only that she started running long distances this late in life, but that she keeps doing it again and again. It can't be easy.

Some marathon runners talk about "hitting the wall." There's a point in the race where your body just doesn't want to go any farther. And if you can just fight through that wall they say, you can make it to the end. But of course a marathon isn't even the most extreme of races. There's the Ironman competition where athletes swim 2.4 miles in open water and then bike for 112 miles and then finish the race by running a marathon. Out here there's the Hardrock 100. Starting and ending in Silverton, runners traverse a 100.5 mile course, over 33,000 feet in elevation gain. And there are plenty more races throughout the world that stretch the minds and bodies of athletes to the brink. But sometimes those bodies simply shut down and the runner collapses on the road and sometimes a participant drops out of the race because they can't make themselves take another step and sometimes a person is disqualified for breaking the rules or going outside of the track. It is no secret that running long distances is hard! It's extremely difficult! To complete a long, grueling, strenuous course not only takes physical stamina, it takes a determination and a drive to press on no matter what might happen to slow you down.

Is it any surprise that the Bible compares this life to running a race? And it's not a 100 meter sprint either! This life is a marathon – or something even more extreme – a long, grueling, strenuous course that takes a determination and a drive to press on. Because this life isn't easy, is it? Living your life in this world isn't simply a pleasant jog through a shade-covered park with a gentle breeze blowing through the trees. Living your life in this world is a little more stressful than that! The wind whips around you, the sun beats down, the climb is steep, the path is uneven, the obstacles are daunting, the length of the race itself is completely overwhelming at times. Oh, there are some easy moments and some pleasant times in this world of course, but brief seconds of respite don't make those difficult stretches any more enjoyable.

An Ugly Stretch

And there are plenty of difficult stretches in this race, aren't there? As you look back at the part of the course you've completed so far, there have undoubtedly been some ugly moments just like there has been for me: times when you might have wanted to give up; situations when you stopped, sat down, and pouted in self-pity; days or weeks or even years when your rebellious streak took center stage and you refused to follow the rules, you refused to stay in between the lines, you refused to do what you knew you were supposed to do because you just didn't care. Our past is filled with those kinds of penalties and faults and infractions – even one of which can disqualify us for the prize. And it's not like we are unaware of our violations: the rules are clear.

God has very plainly laid out the parameters of this race. In no uncertain terms he has explained exactly what the regulations are and the consequences for breaking any one of them. When he says that what we want should never overrule what other people need, he means it! When he says that kindness and gentleness, love and forgiveness are not just optional but required, he means it! When he says there should not be a bit of selfishness or bitterness or anger or laziness in you as you run this race, he means it! And he knows every time you've messed up! He sees every misstep, he's right there when you intentionally or unintentionally cross that line. You can't hide anything from him and so you can't get away with anything either. He knows how poorly you have conducted yourself in this race up to this point. And he knows all about my pitiful performance too.

I haven't run a clean race. In fact, I trip myself up every day! I lose focus, I wander out of my lane, my feet get tangled up in the weeds and the vines of my natural sinful inclinations that I could have easily avoided if I had been paying attention. And what's worse is when I just don't want to follow the path, when I feel like going off in another direction without any regard for what God says. And the consequences for such behavior? The consequences are finishing the race but not in the winner's circle, ending up on the losing side, forfeiting the prize of heaven for that nasty place called hell. This isn't a practice run and there are no second chances. This is the real thing and it truly is a matter of life and death.

The Champion

The apostle Paul was aware of how serious this race was. And his past wasn't too pretty either. Paul had once been an accomplice to murder. He had taken the lead in hunting down Christians and throwing them in jail. He was a government-sanctioned terrorist of those who believed in Jesus as their Savior. And so when he looked back at the race he had run in the first half of his life, it was anything but commendable. In fact, it was horrible, it was atrocious, it was unspeakably appalling. And yet Paul had complete confidence that he was going to finish the race victorious anyway. Not because he had somehow earned the prize, but because Jesus had already earned it for him. The prize was already his.

“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

As Paul continued to run his race he was able to forget about what was behind him: all of the bad things he had done, all of the persecutions he was responsible for, all of the innocent people he had arrested... and strained towards what was ahead of him. And he could leave his past behind him because he knew that his Savior had cleaned up his mess; he trusted that his Lord had forgiven him for everything long before Paul ever knew it.

Jesus has taken care of your messy past too. When Jesus came into this world as a human being, he had to run this same race. He had to get through this same rocky, exhausting course. But he did it perfectly. He never once messed up, he never once stumbled, he never once got off track. Step after step, day after day, year after year Jesus kept in line with his Father's will and finished the race of this life without a single fault to his name. But he didn't take the credit for it. He didn't grab the prize. Instead he grabbed you. He took the number off of his back and pinned it to yours. And then he took the number off of your back and slapped it on his. So that he would get blamed for what you did and he would get penalized for all of your

infractions. That's what the cross is about. The cross is a key part of the consequence. The cross is the finale for those who fail to run the race flawlessly. But not for you. And not for me. Jesus took on the cross for us and through faith in him we have his number on our backs: the number of the winner, the number of the Champion. And so right now – as we speak – the prize is already ours.

We're All in This Together

The prize of heaven is ours right now. We are still in the middle of the race of course, we are still running, we are still struggling, we are still dealing with all of the ups and the downs that this life throws at us, but our victory is guaranteed. Jesus himself has secured the prize and it is simply waiting for us at the finish line. And so whenever we finish, it's ours. Whenever we finish, we win! It doesn't matter how marred and sloppy our individual races might be, we will all be in the winner's circle because of Jesus and the faith he gave us to believe in him.

So press on. Just like Paul did, press on. **I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

Paul knew what was waiting for him at the end. You know what is waiting for you at the end too. You know what has been set aside for your enjoyment for the rest of eternity. And you know that many of the people with whom you are running this race on earth will be there to enjoy it with you. Because we're all in this together.

Many athletes who compete in a marathon tend to run with someone else so that they can encourage one another and push one another and urge one another on. They have someone to pick them up when they fall down and to give them a needed boost of energy and confidence when they fall behind. And the goal isn't really to beat the other person you're running with of course. The goal is not really to get the best time. The goal is simply to finish – and to make sure that those you are running with cross that finish line as well.

Look around you: you have a whole family of Christians you get to run this race with, people to support you and reassure you and keep you headed in the right direction. But you are here for them too. You are here to help those running by your side because sometimes you're going to be the strong one, sometimes you're going to be the steady one, sometimes you're going to be the Christian upon whom they need to lean. Treasure those opportunities and take every advantage of those situations to lend a hand to a Christian whose legs are rubber and whose lungs are burning, because we're all in this together.

And we're going to need one another in the days, weeks, and years ahead. There have been plenty of twists and turns and unexpected barriers so far, and so I would anticipate that we are going to face plenty more ditches and hurdles in the days to come. But regardless of the course, no matter the terrain, in spite of the length, we can run this race with light feet and a full smile on our faces because we know how it's all going to end. We trust that what Jesus did for all of us is going to stand the test of time. We believe that our Savior has already won the victory for us. So let's run. Let's run hard, let's run with confidence, let's run side by side and hand in hand together. And let's finish strong. Because no matter what happens, the prize is ours.

Amen.