

Run the Race Well
Kip Hamby
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Good morning! I hope you had a enjoyable Fourth of July. Upward Sports had a float in the Ames parade and we had a great time getting the word out, and some serious candy. Speaking of Upward, if you have a boy or girl who is kindergarten through 6th grade, let me encourage you to sign them up for football and cheer this fall. Just go to theplex.org and register them for a positive sports experience that will point them well to Jesus. And for those of you who have already committed to be a part of the fun this fall, let me encourage you also: look for a new family to invite! Parents inviting parents and kids inviting kids is by far our best means of recruiting—we'd love to honor the Lord with a record turnout this fall!

Aaron Rosheim did a wonderful job last week wrapping up our *Storm Strong Family* series, and I'm looking forward next Sunday to David kicking off a new series on the prophet Jonah, where we'll learn that God wants to rescue (even) the worst by reshaping even the most reluctant. I think we can all relate to being reluctant to share our faith with difficult people...

You know, when David asked me to teach he said I could pick any topic or passage that I would like, since it was between two series. I mean, like wow—anything? I felt like a kid in the candy store with a twenty five dollar bill!

And it just so happened that when David asked me I had been reading Leviticus in my daily Bible reading so I quickly got excited about two possible topics for today's message. My first choice was to do an in-depth study on leprosy and other skin diseases; or to preach a hellfire and brimstone sermon on the proper removal of mildew. But after thinking about it for about 3 seconds I decided instead to preach on "Running the Christian Race Well." So in light of that close call, please turn with me to Hebrews chapter 12, which is page 1008 in the Bible beneath your chair.

As you do that, imagine with me for a moment that you lived in a futuristic world where there was a great emphasis placed on sports (not hard to imagine, right?). In this world, the outcome of your competition was not about receiving a medal or scholarship, but it actually determined if you would be allowed to live or not.

And finally, imagine that you and your family were selected to run the marathon, and only the top 10% of the runners would be allowed to run another day.

How would that effect your training, and how you viewed the race before you? Would you and your family train half-heartedly, eat poorly, and focus on lesser things? Of course not. You would totally pour yourself into strict training, healthy diet, and developing an effective race strategy.

In Hebrews 12 we will see that the writer of this epistle presents a forceful challenge for Christians to endure in a “marathon” commitment to Christ. We may not have to ever “run for our lives” in a futuristic world, but the Bible makes it clear that we are all called to run a race, a race that is fraught with challenge and even danger. And to not run it well could mean heartbreak, pain, and lasting regret for us and those around us.

But the good news is, fellow runners, there is someone very qualified to help us run the race before us. We have a Coach—capital C—who provides all that we need to win the prize.

Hear is our main idea this morning: **the Christian life is hard—it is an endurance race. But our Coach has not left us without instruction or example in how to run the race well**

Let me read our text for today, Heb. 12:1-2 (NIV)

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 the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Before we look at how to run the race well, let’s take a quick 30,000 foot look at the book of Hebrews for some needed context, and gain a basic understanding of the unique phrase that begins our passage.

The book of Hebrews is summed up well by this statement: “Christ is greater than any angel, priest, or old covenant institution; thus each reader, rather than leaving such a great salvation, is summoned to hold on by faith to the true rest

found in Christ and to encourage others in the church to persevere.” The readers of this epistle were being tempted to give up on their faith in Christ, to not endure. To sum up the letter using today’s theme: “Because seeing Jesus is so worth it, let us push through the pain and finish the race at all costs.”

Let’s take a look now at an unusual and misunderstood phrase that we find in Hebrews 12:1: ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...***

What on earth is meant by “cloud of witnesses?” Is this a New Testament prophecy about how to store data on our computers? Probably not... Authors of classical literature used the image of a “cloud” to describe a large group of people. You probably noted that the author began verse 1 with the word “therefore,” which of course points us back to the prior text, Hebrews chapter 11. And what is Hebrews 11 about? (That’s not a rhetorical question.) That’s right—faith. We see in Hebrews 11 the large group of people that this word “cloud” referred to, a group of men and women who endured trials faithfully and were commended by God.

Some have speculated that this “cloud of witnesses” who have gone before us are now watching us as spectators, cheering us on in our race of faith. And though this view has a strong emotional appeal, I don’t believe that is what the author is trying to communicate. I believe George Guthrie and other commentators have laid out a more likely interpretation:

“They [the great cloud] are witnesses in the sense that they bear witness to the Christian community of God’s faithfulness and the effectiveness of faith. God has given witness to them, he has commended them, and they, as examples, bear witness to him before succeeding generations. In this way, the great cloud of faithful Christ-followers through history offer the community motivation in its current struggle to stay the course of commitment.”

Or as John White puts it in his book *The Fight*, “the writer’s point is to bring witnesses before us who will testify *that faith is worth it.*” These saints of old have completed their race. Now it is our turn; we must run ours. If the Lord carries, what kind of witness, what legacy, will we leave for the generations that follow us?

So how do we run the race well, as did these heroes of the faith? The good news is that our Lord, our Coach if you will, has given us expert instruction on how to do just that.

First of all, we remove all obstacles to our running

*Or as the text says, **we throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles***

You can tell a serious runner, right? You've seen them before: it can be 30 or 40 degrees outside and they're running with nothing on but shorts and shoes! They don't want anything to slow them down. I've always found that pneumonia slows me down considerably....

Interestingly enough, I was asked to teach at Orbit a few weeks ago on this very same passage. (By the way, please go out of your way *often* to thank Karen, Amy, Lisa, Jenna, and all the wonderful volunteers at Orbit. They do an incredible job with our children and grandchildren!)

Their curriculum illustrated this principle of being weighed down by having me carry a backpack loaded up with about 7 dumb bells. Needless to say, it slowed me down considerably as I walked across the stage. Point well made.

And please carefully note the phrase **"everything that hinders"**. Since this is followed by the phrase "and the *sin* that so easily entangles", this "everything" can refer to things that are not necessarily sin. But some things must be rejected if we are to run effectively. Certain possessions, hobbies, the books we read, social media, mindsets and motivations, patterns of life, or even people can occupy us in such a way so as to cool our hearts for Christ.

We must learn to ask, does this thing I am doing fuel and stoke and help me in my pursuit of God, or does it distract me or slow me down? Be sensitive to the effect a certain action or mindset has on your heart. For example, I detected about three weeks ago that I was being too goal and checklist oriented. With the Holy Spirit's help, I was able to sense that this wasn't helping me run my race well, it was actually weighing me with self-preoccupation. Whatever may impede us in our race, let's be ruthless in throwing it off!

The next phrase is no surprise to us: **the sin that so easily entangles**. We get it that sin can trip us up, don't we? Let me ask you a few personal questions: what is it that besetting sin, that idol of the heart that you battle with regularly? And what might happen if you don't repent and turn from that sin? How might that affect your race? I can remember a high school relay runner at state one year who celebrated his team's victory by *throwing* his baton at the end of the race. That single act—whether out of ignorance or pride—caused his entire first-place team to be disqualified. No trip to the medal stand.

Those who read this epistle originally—and we today—cannot afford to be hindered in a race which has such eternal consequences. Let us not play around with sin, thinking foolishly that we will be that one exception to the rule “a man sows what he reaps”. Unrepentant sin will cling to us and take us down like a lion on the back of a wildebeest.

Do you want to run this Christian race well? Let us remove all obstacles to our running.

Secondly, if we would run the Christian race well,
“let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us

Undoubtedly all of you have seen the decal with the number 26.2 on the back of someone's car. Perhaps you originally thought that this was a reference to how many miles per gallon they get in that vehicle. (And then you noticed that some cars only get 13.1 miles to the gallon.) Then you learned that wasn't the case at all! It means that they've run a marathon, and you haven't! 26.2 miles.

The writer of Hebrews wants us to comprehend that this race that we call life is a marathon. The ESV says “let us run with *endurance* the race that is set before us!” Life is an endurance race, it's not a sprint!

I learned a good definition of perseverance in Orbit: it is “refusing to give up when life gets hard.” If you've competed in long-distance races, even a 5K, you know how hard a race can be. You have to contend with bad weather, injuries, cramps, crowds of runners jockeying for position, psychological battles, and especially fatigue. It is easy to want to give up.

I can remember one difficult 5K race I ran with my 6th grade son Ryan. (He's pictured here three years later as a cross-country runner for DeWitt High School. He's the one with the headband on—I used to have hair too.) I was a fairly

competitive runner so I assumed halfway through the race that he was probably struggling to keep up with his dad. That's when he uttered those words that I'll never forget: "Can I run on ahead?" (I probably should have told him "No!")

Any distance race feels like torture at the time. You're struggling for breath, you're going faster than you would like, and you've got a long way to go before you're done. Does that feel like an accurate description of your life about now? High schoolers and college students trying to honor the Lord in your studies and extra-curriculars? Young professionals trying to excel at work and be a witness? Mothers and dads of young children, training them to be the future of the Church? Grandparents trying to attend your grandkid's events so you can encourage them and speak into their lives? Let us run with endurance!

How can we specifically apply this metaphor of running with perseverance? **Let me share two ideas that can be game-changers.**

First of all, look at *each day* from the perspective of it being an endurance race. It's actually quite fitting. And for the sake of time, let me focus on how we end each day.

Near the end of a physical marathon a runner often hits what is known as the "wall", a time of complete depletion. In this critical moment the runner's self-talk can turn entirely negative: "It hurts too much. It's not worth the pain. I've got to quit!" Vince Lombardi, NFL Hall of Fame coach, rightly said that fatigue makes cowards of us all.

The parallel here for ending each of our days is obvious. It's rare for me to not battle tiredness at some point in my evening (And I trust that I'm not alone—looking for some nods out there!). To take the edge off our fatigue we often reach for the remote, or a pint of ice cream, or a mindless novel, or fill in the blank. Certainly there is nothing intrinsically sinful with these. When they become a problem is when they keep us from finding our true rest in Christ, and we essentially ignore him the rest of the evening, even though he's present with us.

It seems to me that we would be better "runners" if we leaned into God's supernatural resources in our fatigue, and by his grace and Spirit seek to end our day's race well. Matt Chandler calls this the "2nd shift". He challenges husbands

to come home from their first job and give of themselves again and sacrificially serve their wives, kids, and neighbors. With the Spirit flowing through us, we all—both husbands and wives—can wage war with our mental and physical fatigue, repent of our laziness when needed, and seek to enjoy Christ and others. Isn't this better than giving in to irritability and the flesh? No elbowing your spouse out there!

My second application addresses the idea of retirement. Younger people, hang with me—it will be here before you know it. When you consider running with perseverance, it can be natural to think of the retirement years. Some retirees choose to spend their final years in selfish gratification; while others intentionally choose to use their increased availability to make a difference for God's kingdom. Every retired believer can engage faithfully in prayer and good deeds. Some can serve in adventurous ways in serving our community or world, which we call at Christ Community Third Place and Fourth Place. Many of our friends in Classic Service are doing that regularly—I commend you!

Let me read to you an excerpt from a letter that I received recently from someone in our church who retired a year ago and just went on his first overseas mission trip . As you listen, consider this idea of running with perseverance, of finishing the race well:

He wrote: "So grateful for retirement and the freedom to pursue opportunities like this [trip]. It was such a blessing and privilege to be with these refugees and share a measure of Christ's love and truth with them." Isn't that great?!

John Piper is well known for a sermon called "Don't Waste Your Life". He's also well known for a similar teaching: "Don't Waste Your Retirement". May our oldest generation here at Christ Community always model this Caleb spirit!

Eugene Peterson paraphrases this passage delightfully in *The Message*: "Strip down, start running—and never quit!"

We run this endurance race well by removing all obstacles, and running with perseverance. Now third, and finally, if we would run the Christian race well—**we will look to Jesus** as our example of suffering and endurance

Hebrews 12:2 exhorts 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”***—Hebrews 12:2

Earlier we noted the example of those imperfect, yet exemplary men and women in Hebrews 11. Now here in chapter 12 things come to a climax: we now are called to look at Jesus, *the Hero of the faith, the greatest example of all*. This fixing our eyes on Jesus is where our greatest encouragement comes from in our race. When we fix our gaze upon him, what is it that we see? What is it that encourages us to also suffer and endure well in the race of life?

There are five glorious truths about Jesus in this one verse—Heb. 12:2--that will inspire us to run to win:

First of all, seeing Jesus as “author” and “perfecter” of our faith.

“Author” can be translated as champion, pioneer, trailblazer, leader, forerunner, or initiator. In other words, faith is Jesus’ idea, it’s his life-giving connection with us, and his free gift. *He writes our faith stories*. If you’re trying to control and run life on your own terms, let me encourage you to put your pencil down! Jesus is the author of your faith!

“Perfecter” of our faith simply means that our Lord will see our faith through to the end. He will once again restore mankind fully into his image. He did this by his sacrificial death on the cross and powerful resurrection from the dead. He is the first-fruits of the life that God intended for us. Or in keeping with our race theme, “believers rely completely on him, for he ran the greatest race right to the finish, and we come to fullness of life only in him”

What else do we see about Jesus that inspires us to run well? **We see that he suffered in the hope of future reward**

We see this in the phrase **“for the joy set before him”**

A good runner doesn’t continually look over his shoulder to see if his opponents are gaining on him; nor does he look down wearily at his feet. A disciplined runner keeps his eyes focused on the finish line! He wants nothing more than to rest from his work, and to be rewarded for his faithful effort. This is the joy set before him.

This was true of Jesus. Jared Wilson put it well in his book *Supernatural Power for Everyday People*, which we read and discussed in Trek this Spring. He wrote

“Jesus saw...joy beyond the cross, seeing it as the means to...renewed intimacy with the Father.” The Son of God remembered the bliss which he enjoyed with his Father in eternity past, and longed to experience that once again: resting at his right hand, knowing and loving one another, and being worshipped by the angels. For the joy set before him!

So what is the joy set before us in the Christian race? It is the same as for Christ—unbroken intimacy with our heavenly Father for all eternity! So as we run, we set our mind on things above and anticipate the glories of heaven that the Scriptures unabashedly announce....That we will behold Jesus’ face in love and worship; that we will feast at his banquet as his spotless bride; that we will be completely free from our old enemies--sin, death, and sorrow; that we will enjoy eternal peace, beauty, and fellowship with our loved ones; and that we will have new, glorified bodies like Christ’s. This is our motivation. For the joy that is set before us!

We also see in verse two that Jesus **“endured the cross”**

It is so easy for Jesus’ suffering on the cross to become white noise for us as Christians. I know there are times when my mind and emotions need a reminder of how much our Savior truly endured there. Let me share an excerpt from one graphic and insightful account of Jesus’ suffering on the cross:

“As the Roman soldier swings the hammer, the Son recalls how he and the Father first designed the medial nerve of the human forearm—the sensations it would be capable of. The design proves flawless—the nerve performs exquisitely. “Up you go!” They lift the cross. God is on display in his underwear, and can scarcely breathe.

But these pains are a mere warm-up to his other and growing dread. He begins to feel a foreign sensation. Somewhere during this day an unearthly foul odor began to waft, not around his nose, but his heart. He *feels* dirty. Human wickedness starts to crawl upon his spotless being—the living excrement from our souls. The apple of his Father’s eye turns brown with rot.

His Father! He must face the Father like this!

From heaven the Father now rouses himself like a lion disturbed, shakes his mane, and roars against the shriveling remnant of a man hanging on a cross.

Never has the Son seen the Father look at him so, never felt even the least of his hot breath. But the roar shakes the unseen world and darkens the visible sky. The Son does not recognize these eyes...

Of course the Son is innocent. He is blamelessness itself. The Father knows this. But the divine pair have an agreement, and the unthinkable must now take place. Jesus will be treated as if personally responsible for every sin ever committed.

The author and perfecter of our faith endured the cross for the joy set before him. May this act of unfathomable love never cease to sober and thrill and grip our hearts!

We also see a fourth glorious truth about Jesus that will help us endure faithfully: He...**“despised the shame”**. The cross was an instrument of shame that the powerful Romans employed very effectively. Being tortured publicly and hanging naked for all to see as a condemned criminal brought great shame to those on the receiving end of it. Adam and Eve after their act of cosmic treason attempted to hide behind the trees of the garden, but someone hanging on a cross had nowhere to hide.

Hanging on a cross was also a source of shame for the Jews: **Deut. 21:22-23 says: “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”**

So it is evident that the world’s view of the cross was one of shame. But what does it mean here that “Jesus despised the shame?”

David A. deSilva sheds some light for us on this question: “Thinking only of the evaluation of God (‘the joy that was set before him’)...Jesus despised (i.e., considered valueless) the disgraceful reputation a cross would bring him in the eyes of the Greco-Roman world. His own vindication came afterward, when he ‘sat at the right hand of the throne of God.’ While in the public court of opinion, Jesus took the most disgraceful seat—on a cross—in God’s court of reputation, Jesus was worthy of the highest honor.”

Mike Wilkerson in his excellent book *Redemption* offers us these helpful words: “Because of Jesus’ despising the cross—counting the shame as of little concern

when evaluated against God's opinion of him—the cross is no longer the symbol of shame that the Enemy intended, but a symbol of hope and healing for God's children.

Jesus despised the shame. And finally, we can find motivation to run our race because Jesus...

“is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”

We just read that Jesus was vindicated by the Father. In addition, being seated at the right hand of the throne of God speaks of Jesus being favored, it points to his rule, and it describes also his rest and reward. This is the glory of the ascension, which we often leave it out when we think of the many wonderful facets of the gospel. Looking to a seated Jesus as we run our race reminds us that He is in total control, working all things together for the good of those who love him. We can be confident that no suffering is wasted, that he uses it to discipline and grow us.

This Jesus is beyond all comparison, our truest Hero and example. To gaze upon Him is to be saved and inspired!

In closing, you may be listening and realize that you don't really know this Jesus that we have been talking about. You may even confess in your own heart that at times your life, your race, has felt aimless. If you have been moved by hearing of Jesus' beauty and strength, I would strongly encourage you to speak with me or someone else here who can help you know more about a relationship with Him.

I recall a big race in the Quad Cities a few years ago where the leader in the race did not know where the finish line was and took a wrong turn. It ended up costing him the race. Nothing could more be more tragic than discovering at the end of your life that you ran your race in vain.

Conclusion

And if you're a follower of Jesus already, I want to leave you with a final challenge. One of the mistakes that you will often see at cross country meets is the runner who has “too much left” at the end of the race. They sprint incredibly fast during the final stretch, and pass a number of runners. The problem, however, was that they didn't push themselves hard enough the other 98% of the race, and as a result, did not finish with the time or place that they could have.

This hurts both them, and their team. As runners in the race of life, a life given by God, we need to be willing to push ourselves at times to discomfort, to endure when things are hard, and to fix our eyes on the prize. Even as Jesus did.

Let's pray: Father, we confess that we're not always very good runners. We lack discipline, and when we do run well, we often seek our own glory. We thank you for the grace and forgiveness that you daily give us as your sons and daughters. Lord, please be with our senior high youth and their leaders as they share the gospel in Mexico this week. Help us all to run light, run tough, and keep our eyes on the tape, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ ESV Study Bible, (Crossway), 2358

ⁱⁱ George Guthrie, *NIV Application Commentary, Hebrews*, (Zondervan), 397

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews*, (IVP), 229

^{iv} Jared Wilson, *Supernatural Power for Everyday People*, (Thomas Nelson), 113

^v Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps*, (Zondervan), 53-54

^{vi} David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113

^{vii} Mike Wilkerson, *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry* (Crossway), 99-100