

Run the Race Hebrews 12

CBS has this exciting new show “Million Dollar Mile” where a talented athlete must run a mile on a designated route through the streets of Los Angeles. If they finish the race they win a million dollars. They don’t have to do it in a certain amount of time and they aren’t competing against other runners, so they don’t have to win first place, they just have to finish the race to win the prize.

But to make it more difficult, there are 5 obstacles courses in the middle of the race that require skill, strength, and endurance to make it through. If they succeed, they face two more obstacles at the end, one that includes scaling a 15-story building. If they successfully make it through all 7 of these obstacles and finish the race, they win 1 million dollars.

But there’s more. Two minutes after the race begins, a world class athlete called a “defender” is released at the starting line whose goal is to catch up to the racer. If they do, the racer is eliminated and loses the reward. And the final twist is that after every obstacle if the racer is just too tired to continue, they can exit the race and settle for a smaller prize that is easier to attain.

As I was studying Hebrews 12 this week, I realized this game is a great picture of what it’s like to live the Christian life. The Bible says the Christian life is like running a race, and like the T.V. show, we aren’t competing against other racers or against time, we simply need to finish the race, and there will be a great reward. Just don’t quit, don’t give up; don’t turn away from Jesus. Finish the race. But, like the show, it isn’t going to be easy. It’s long and difficult and there are going to be obstacles along the way. There’s going to be pain and suffering. There’s going to be persecution and opposition. We’re going to face impossible situations and gut-wrenching heartache. We’re also going to face the lure of worldly pleasures that tempt us to give up early so we can enjoy a lesser reward. And we have an enemy that’s prowling around, trying to catch and destroy us. All kinds of things come before us to knock us off course and make us quit.

I don’t know if anyone will be able to finish the Million Dollar Mile, but how are we supposed to finish the race that’s marked out before us? Well, the book of Hebrews was written to a community of Christians who were running the race,

but who were also facing the overwhelming obstacle of persecution and thinking about giving up. And the author of Hebrews has been pleading with them to stay in and keep running until the end, and now in chapter 12 we are going to see him give them 5 strategies for how they can keep running the race and overcome any obstacle that gets in their way. These same strategies apply to our situations as well, whatever obstacles we face that make us want to give up. I'm trusting that there will be at least one of these strategies that God will show you that you need to focus in on to help you persevere in running your race. So let him speak to you this morning through these things and stir your heart to take action. The first strategy is in verses 1-4.

Read Hebrews 12:1-4.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The author begins by referring to the people he just wrote about in chapter 11 – people of faith whose lives bear witness to us that God will reward those who finish the race. Therefore, we should run like them and throw aside anything that's holding us back or weighing us down and run with perseverance the race that is set before us. And the first strategy to help us do that is in verse 2 – we need to look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. Keep looking to Jesus. Keep pressing in to know him more and grow in your relationship with him. When you're weary of the battle and feel like giving up or giving in, look to Jesus to find strength to continue.

Why will that help? Because he has gone before us and run the race himself. He's not like a general who sits back in safety while his soldiers run into battle. He leads the way. He faced the obstacles before we did, he overcame the temptation, he suffered from opposition. He ran the race ahead of us and endured incredible suffering and pain on the cross, and he did it for us. He did it for the "joy set before him," which is the joy he would experience in heaven with

all of us who have been redeemed. Jesus went through much more pain and suffering to finish the race than we will have to face and he did it so that we could be with him. Are we willing to keep running through whatever we face so we can be with him?

When you're feeling weary and fainthearted and you want to give up, the first thing you need to do is look to Jesus to find courage and strength. The second strategy is in verses 5-11.

Read Hebrews 12:5-11.

⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

So the second strategy for overcoming the obstacles we face and continuing to run the race is to see the obstacles in a totally different way. Rather than seeing them as things that God may be using to punish us or things that he isn't able to save us from, we need to see them as obstacles he puts in our way to train us, strengthen us, and discipline us to be stronger and to become more like him.

When a new recruit goes through basic training, the instructors put them through all kinds of difficult and painful situations. They aren't doing it to punish them; they're doing it to strengthen and prepare them for battle. When a loving parent disciplines their children, they don't do it just to punish them. They do it to teach them and strengthen them and get them ready to face this difficult world. An instructor or parent who doesn't discipline is doing a very unloving thing.

The same is true of God. We need to see the difficulties we go through and the obstacles we face in a different way. God is treating us like sons and daughters that he loves. And he uses the pain of discipline and correction and reproof to train us for our good, so we will share in his holiness, and in the end it will produce a harvest of righteousness.

If I think back on the most difficult obstacles I've had to face, they were very painful and I'd never want to go through them again, but I can also see how God used them to deal with deep rooted sin in my life – sin that I otherwise wouldn't have seen. But because of the pain God had me go through I was able to see that sin and make major changes that have been for my good and the good of other people in my life. Sufferings are never wasted on the children of God, if we are willing to be trained by them. But we have to see them in a different way and be willing to wait and listen for whatever God wants to teach us through them.

You may be going through pain right now and it may not be directly because of something you've done. But it may be that God is using it to stir up something deeper inside you that you need to see – deep rooted anger, fear, or pride, or something else. God is purposefully using that pain to produce something very good in you – if you are willing to endure and be trained by it. Don't allow the lies of the enemy to harden your heart against God. Don't turn away from him in rebellion. Endure the suffering by faith as God's way of producing something good in you, and remember that one day it's going to come to an end. So this is the second strategy – see your suffering in a whole new way. The third is in the following verses.

Read Hebrews 12:12-17.

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

The third strategy is to help other runners along the way – to have each other’s backs; to see that no one drops out early. We aren’t competing against one another, we’re in the race together and helping one another endure to the end. There’s nothing more inspiring than watching a runner slow down to assist another runner that can’t go on. God wants you to be that kind of runner.

When we help one another with encouragement and support, we are able to overcome obstacles together. If we try to do it alone, we will likely give up because the battle is just too intense. We need our brothers and sisters. So run the race together and help other runners along the way. We need to be on the lookout for those who are feeling weak; who are being overwhelmed by obstacles so we can keep one another from becoming bitter and turning to rebellion because of the suffering we’re going through. The author says, don’t let anyone become like Esau who threw in the towel because he was so hungry. Help one another. Encourage one another. Run the race together. That’s the third strategy. The fourth is next.

Read Hebrews 12:18-24.

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

A big part of finishing the race is to keep thinking about the reward that is waiting for you at the end. And this is the fourth strategy in chapter 12: Think about what’s waiting for you! It says back in verse 2 that Jesus endured opposition from sinful men and the agony of the cross for the joy that was set before him, and that’s what these verses are about.

The author first makes it clear that what was waiting for them wasn't anything like what their fathers experienced under the old covenant on Mt. Sinai. They encountered God in a terrifying way because Jesus hadn't redeemed them yet. So, because of their background in the old covenant, some of the readers might have thought that's what was waiting for them, and that wouldn't be very motivating.

But the author tells them that's not at all what they had to look forward to. Instead, what is waiting for those who finish the race is a breathtaking entrance into the heavenly city – the new Jerusalem. It reminds me of when I first came into Jerusalem back in January. The only way to get to it is from one of several mountain peaks in the surrounding area, so you ascend the last peak between you and the holy city and back in the first century when Hebrews was written you would behold the magnificent limestone walls and the walls of the temple towering above everything else. It was a spectacular sight to see. But the new Jerusalem will be so much better!

It is the heavenly city of the living God. In that city there are innumerable angels gathered in joyful celebration. There's God himself seated on his throne, the glorious Judge and King. There are the spirits of all the saints who have gone before. And there is Jesus, the one that this whole book of Hebrews has been speaking about. That's what's happening right now and that's what's waiting for those who finish the race. It's a reward that's a whole lot better than winning a million dollars. So we need to keep thinking about our reward. The final strategy is in the last few verses.

Read Hebrews 12:25-29.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

This strategy is to remember that those who quit the race and turn against God in rebellion will have to face the judgment of God who is a consuming fire. God has promised that a day is coming when he will bring judgment to the world and anything that does not belong to his kingdom will be shaken and brought to ruin. So when we feel like giving up, we need to remember that, and instead of throwing in the towel, we need to keep running and be thankful that in Christ we will never have to face God's judgement. So keep running the race. The temporary afflictions we face in this life are worth it to receive the joy of our eternal inheritance. Keep running the race. Be grateful you will never have to face God's judgment and worship him with awe and reverence.

These are the strategies we can use to finish the race. Yes it will be long; yes it will be difficult; but God has given us everything we need to endure. The first strategy is to keep looking to Jesus, who already finished the race for us to earn our salvation. For some of you, that's the strategy you need to take hold of today. The second is to see the pain and struggles you're going through in a whole new way – God is using it to discipline and train you to bring about something very good in you. And some of you need to embrace that. The third is to run the race together – have each other's backs. And maybe that's what you needed to hear this morning. The fourth is to remember our awesome eternal reward – the joy set before us that will be worth whatever pain we're going through. Maybe you need to key in on that. And the last is to be thankful that we will never have to face the judgment of God. Maybe that's for you.

Which one of these strategies is the most helpful for you today? What did God want you to hear this morning? If he lays something on your heart, take it to him in prayer and keep running the race.