

Life's Most Important Race

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[0 : 00] One of the first major non-human casualties of the coronavirus crisis was college basketball's biggest tournament, March Madness.

Well, right after that, as most everyone knows, other sporting events were canceled. Now, we're living in a world that's basically where there's just no live sporting events taking place. Now, for many people in this sports-crazed world, this is the most devastating and depressing thing that's happened throughout this worldwide pandemic.

I'm sure there are some people in South Carolina and beyond, church-going people, who were more concerned or more upset when Clemson canceled their spring football game than they were when their church canceled their first service.

But, of course, I know no one in Pickens County or no one in our church would have ever been disappointed like that. It's the fact that many people in this world and in our country in particular have gone overboard in their involvement with some even worship of sports.

[1 : 21] Some people have just become obsessed with it. But, you know, the popularity of athletics, the popularity of athletes, it's not something new.

It's not because of all the TV networks and all the things that are on TV today. Sports, sport events, athletic contests, they've been popular for centuries.

If you're a reader of the New Testament, you know that the Apostle Paul was either a sports fan or he knew that many people were because in several of his letters, he uses sports analogies.

Here's a good example from 1 Corinthians 9. He says, Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. I do not run aimlessly.

I do not box as one beating the air. The unknown author of Hebrews also uses what has become a well-known sports analogy.

[2 : 23] I want you to look at it with me this morning in Hebrews 12. It's in the first two verses. He talks about living the Christian life in terms of running a race.

Let's look at it. Hebrews 12, verse 1. 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.

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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.

The writer is describing in these verses Christian living in terms of running a long-distance race. It's important that we understand a long-distance race, a marathon, 10,000 meters, something much longer than a sprint.

He's calling attention to how a successful athlete must run, disciplining himself, staying focused, enduring pain to illustrate living a faithful Christian life.

[3 : 46] Now, before we look at the details of these verses, we need to note that the writer has just spent the entire chapter 11 describing men and women of the Old Testament and their faith, their faithfulness.

In fact, in chapter 11, he is holding these Old Testament saints up as models for us. We're to look at them and be inspired and know that we can live out our faith.

We can live faithfully just like they did. Now, it's encouraging to know that these models of faith that he holds up, they're far from perfect people.

They were very flawed individuals just like us. They were sinners just like us. If you go back and read some of the names in Hebrews chapter 11, you'll remember from, I hope, your Bible reading, Abraham, he was a great man of faith, the father of the people of faith, people of God today.

But Abraham was also known for lying. Moses, the great liberator of the people of Israel, he had anger issues at times, didn't he?

[5 : 09] Rahab is mentioned. She was a prostitute. And most Christians are familiar with the story of David, all of the positive things that he did as a king, as a great military leader, as the writer of Psalms.

But he was also an adulterer and a murderer. Now, I want you to think, the fact that God uses imperfect, flawed, sinful people like them should encourage us that he can use us.

They were flawed. There were times that they fell flat on their faces, spiritually speaking. By the grace of God, they always got up. And we can do the same thing.

God can work in our lives to enable us to be faithful and to be used by him to serve good purposes, his good purposes in our homes, in this church, in this community.

So I want us this morning to look. Hebrews chapter 12. I want us to see how we must cooperate with God as he works in us to help us run the race of faithful and useful Christian living.

[6 : 35] First thing I want us to see is that we must eliminate anything that may slow us down or trip us up. If we're going to run this race of faithful Christian living and be successful, we have got to eliminate anything that may slow us down, anything that may cause us to trip and fall.

Look at verse 1, the second sentence. Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely. He's talking about eliminating two things.

First, we must lay aside every weight that might slow us down. Just like an athlete, we've got to exercise the self-control and personal discipline to lay aside anything that may hinder us and prevent us from living a holy life and really being used by God.

Examine yourself. Think about it. What have you found that slows you down or hinders you from living this kind of life?

We're not talking about sinful things here. That'll come next. We're talking about things that anything here. It could be something good, something positive in and of itself.

[7 : 56] For an example, some people take a hobby too far. Some people become obsessed with playing golf, fishing, hunting.

What could be a great form of recreation, relaxation, fellowship with others, it becomes an obsession. It takes all your time away from your family.

Keeps you from being really involved in the life of the church. It may even be just distracting to you doing your job. Some people, it's their job.

They're addicted to it. They're obsessed. And for them, their job is their life, not family and certainly not God.

And then some people, it's the influence of a certain person in your life. Maybe a longtime friend. Maybe someone that has come into your life recently.

[9 : 00] It may be a certain group that when you hang out with them, it just drags you down spiritually. It causes you to think thoughts and engage in conversations that you know are not pleasing to God.

And you'd really be ashamed for people at church to know that you were involved in such conversations or even activities. What about social media? Nothing's wrong with it.

In and of itself, it could be a fun thing, a way to keep up with family and friends and things like that. But you know, as well as I do, social media has become an addiction to a lot of people.

I want to ask you to just maybe do a time study sometime. Think about the amount of time you spend on Facebook, other forms of social media, or just surfing the internet.

Maybe that will shed some light on why you find it hard to make time to pray, to spend some time just prayerfully, carefully, slowly reading the Bible, seeking to understand God's ways and God's will.

[10 : 12] You know, you might find that some of your social media, it's not just distracting you and your relationship with God. It's taking time away from meaningful face-to-face interaction with your children, with your spouse, with other people in your life that you need to be doing things with and be with in person.

Social media, it can be a great way to keep up with people that you really want to keep up with, need to keep up with. But it is hindering many people's relationships, their relationship with God, their relationship with their family, their relationship, real relationship with friends.

If that's true for you, even though it would be difficult, you need to lay it aside. Just like that hobby that is becoming an obsession, just like that person or that crowd that's dragging you down. We're told here, we've got to lay it aside because it is hindering us from living the faithful Christian life that God has called us to live.

And really, if we are Christians, the life that we want to live ourselves. This past Tuesday, many members of our church prayed for spiritual awakening with over 200,000 Christians, probably from around the world, but especially in this country.

[11 : 43] What I want us to understand, as I mentioned at the beginning this morning, the first step to a spiritual awakening is for us to experience a personal spiritual renewal, for us to personally be broken over our sin and draw close to God in real loving fellowship.

The second step to personal, to spiritual awakening is a church revival. When God does a work in so many of us, let's just say in our church, that He changes our church.

He changes the focus, the priority, the spirit of our worship, the desires of our hearts. And then, after Christians have truly become spiritually awake, churches have revived, then we can expect to see God move in larger areas to bring about a true spiritual awakening that will touch even the lives of unsaved people.

In fact, many will come to Christ as a result of such a spiritual awakening. I want to ask you, you prayed on Tuesday.

Have you continued to pray? Have you continued to think about how we need to pray? for personal spiritual renewal, for church revival, for a big, wide spiritual awakening.

[13 : 14] What is hindering you from praying that way every day? What is hindering you from experiencing your own personal spiritual renewal?

Think about it. What is hindering you from living a faithful, consistent Christian life? Well, God wants you to identify it.

Name it. And ask Him to help you to work on it, to eliminate it. I want to encourage you. You know what it is. If you're a Christian, the Spirit of God lives within you.

He'll make it known. He wants you to know. And deep down, if you are a child of God, you want to know. I want to encourage you. Stop allowing it to drag you down spiritually.

Stop allowing it or him or her to pollute your heart and mind. Stop allowing it to waste your time.

Don't allow anyone or anything to keep you from enjoying a personal, close relationship with God and being used by Him for His glory and other people's good.

[14 : 33] Look back in the verse. We see another way we've got to discipline ourselves in verse 1. We must lay aside every sin which clings so closely and trips us up.

The writer has in mind a runner in that day in the ancient world, stripping off clothes that would slow Him down. All sin causes us to fall but every one of us have certain sins that keep tripping us up.

What sin or sins do you find that keeps clinging to you or you are clinging to it and every few days or every few weeks it trips you up.

You know what it is. One thing or a couple of things sinful attitudes, words or actions that is preventing you from living this faithful Christian life that we're being called here and told that we'll be enabled by God to do.

In the context of this passage it could refer to the sin of not trusting God a lack of faith.

[15 : 51] He's been talking about that throughout the book of Hebrews. So let me just ask you do you really trust God in the details of your life? Are you more likely when problems arise to worry or to pray?

Are you more likely to look to God for answers or look everywhere except to God? Do you really trust God as we're going through this pandemic?

As we're going through this great unusual event? Are you trusting God looking to Him depending on Him? Or maybe your problem is a different kind of sin.

You know what it is. Could be anger. That's your number one problem. It could be gossip or slander. It could be some type of sexual immorality, lust.

Could be lying. You lie. You tell more lies to cover up lies. It could be it's just laziness.

[17 : 02] You just don't do what you know you need to do. It could be an alcohol or drug issue. You know what your major sin problem is.

So I want to encourage you to ask God to help you to start resisting the temptation. Ask God to help you to not only resist the temptation but to overcome it.

To develop godly and holy habits in place of this. Now if God is dealing with you right now about a specific sin or specific sins the first way you need to respond to God is to confess that sin. Agree with Him about it and turn from it. We have looked several times during these online sermons at 1 John 1.9.

If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. One of my favorite verses.

[18:05] One of my most used verses. But it's also a great comfort to know that when I truly confess to God agree with God hate that sin turn from it He forgives.

He cleanses. He gives me a fresh start and He will do that for you. It's also important to understand that whatever the temptation is regardless of how strong it may be you can resist it.

You can overcome it. God clearly tells us we have His Word on it. Look at this in 1 Corinthians 10. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it.

God is faithful even when we're not. And if we're children of God the Scripture says here He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. He will always provide a way of escape.

[19:17] Our problem is we don't always look for it. Our problem is we don't always take it when we do see it. But I want you to understand by God's grace you can eliminate whatever it is whatever sin whatever hindrance that is keeping you from running the race of faithful Christian living.

but you've got to do what God calls you to do. You've got to obey Him and we move on in this passage and see some of our other responsibilities along this line.

Number two we must put forth consistent effort and stay on course in order to run this race effectively. Look at the last part of verse one. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

This involves two things. He says we must run with endurance. An Olympic type long distance runner runs with the attitude that no matter what no matter how much pain I feel in my knees or ankles or whatever no matter how exhausted I am I will not quit.

I will not stop. I am going to finish the race. Well that's the kind of determination we've got to have when it comes to living a faithful Christian life every day.

[20:47] You know as well as I do too many people have professed faith in Jesus gave the appearance of starting to live a Christian life starting down the path starting down the race but somewhere along the line sooner or later they dropped out they quit.

No doubt you have thought of some people some individuals who have done that. It may be that the truth is that describes you.

Be honest. What I want us to understand is that all Christians struggle at times to stay faithful. The Christian life is never a cakewalk.

It's never a stroll in the park for any Christian. Christian life is a true race an agonizing long distant race.

Every true child of God will stumble and fall at times but every true child of God will sooner or later get up.

[22:00] that's because God will enable us to get up. Paul was confident of that when he wrote this in the book of Philippians and I am sure of this that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

God will not allow his true children to drop out of the race of Christian living and stay out. There may be times you are a committed Christian now but there were times when you walked away from the Lord.

Maybe you fell deeply into sin but God wouldn't leave you there. He rescued you. He picked you up. He dusted you off.

You confessed your sin. You repented. He forgave you and gave you a fresh start. That's what God does in the life of every one of his children. You know it's not easy.

ever to run the race of faithful Christian living. But God does not leave us alone. God does not ever tell us just do the best that you can.

[23:11] God works in us from within through his spirit. It's God who gives us this desire. And it's God who is the one who gives us the power to be faithful.

One of my favorite verses in all of scripture, Philippians 2.13. Paul said, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

We're not in this race on our own. God, through his spirit, lives in us. And he will enable us to be faithful.

But he does require us to cooperate. cooperate. I want us to look at one more thing. Here in this one, at the end of verse 1. We are responsible to cooperate with him.

Look at this. We must run with endurance the race that is set before us. The long distance runner's got to run the race along the course that has been marked out for him.

[24 : 14] He can't take a shortcut. He certainly wouldn't want to take a detour. He's got to run the race that's been marked out in order to stay qualified. Well, God has marked out a particular course for you and for me.

In fact, God has marked out a particular course, a race, uniquely for you and then for me. Truth is, some of us have a more easy race than others.

Some people, the race that God has marked out for them, most of the race is smooth. Not many hills and valleys.

But then there are other Christians, other faithful men and women of God. For whatever reason, God's course for them has a lot more hills, a lot more valleys, even potholes along the way.

people. But I want us to understand that whatever course of life that God has called us to, we must endure, we must persevere, we must always keep on remaining faithful with confidence that God's going to enable us.

[25 : 35] Day in and day out, God is going to work in us to enable us if we will. I want to ask you, are you putting forth consistent effort to stay in the race, to stay on course, to live the Christian life that you know God's calling to and deep down you want to live?

If not, why not? What needs to change? Is it an attitude? Is it a lifestyle? Do you need to get serious about spending time with God, talking to Him in prayer, listening to Him as you read His Word?

No one can live the Christian life without spending time with God like this. No one. You know what you need to do. God always makes it clear to us.

So I want to encourage you to ask Him and then obey Him. Do it now. Our final responsibility is the most important one. It's the most important one because of where we're looking and because Jesus will enable us to be successful in all these other things.

Look there. We must stay focused on our goal and our goal is Jesus. Verse 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.

[27 : 10] The Olympic runner runs with his eyes on one goal, the finish line, to get the prize, whatever it might be. Well, we've got to run our race with our eyes fixed upon our Lord Jesus.

And the writer here explains why in the rest of verse 2. Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith. Everything about the Christian life, it begins, it continues and ends with Jesus.

And there's a special focus in Scripture on His death on the cross for our sins. Now, in keeping with this race imagery, He has cleared the path for us to run in terms of He has eliminated the roadblocks, things that would stop us.

He has eliminated through His death and resurrection. But all of us, along the way, as we run this race, there are hills and valleys.

There are obstacles that we've got to overcome, that we've got to endure. But the Lord always promises He'll never leave us nor forsake us.

[28 : 27] He is with us. Look also, Jesus has already endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. The cross was the lowest form of execution in the Roman world.

A Roman citizen could not be executed by crucifixion no matter what his crime was. Crucifixion was the way of execution for the lowest of the low.

It was, it involved torture. It was exposed, the person who was being crucified to public humiliation.

Well, the scripture says that Jesus willingly endured that death and chose to disregard that shame.

Do you know why? The scripture tells us here, Jesus did that for the joy that was set before Him.

Again, in verse two, Jesus looked beyond the horror, the pain, the suffering of the cross to the joy that He would experience on the other side.

[29 : 39] And that joy involved two things. One is stated right here. He knew that He would return to His place of honor, look at it, seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

But He also knew that having completed His work on the cross, His salvation would be provided for every person who would ever believe in Him.

That gave Him joy to know He was going back to the Father, seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us, His people. It brought Jesus joy to know that on the other side, after His death and resurrection, salvation would be freely proclaimed as a gift to all who will receive Him as their Savior and Lord.

We need to keep our eyes of faith firmly on Jesus every day. And I want you to think about two reasons we ought to do that. First, we are to follow His example.

And what Jesus did there on the cross, He demonstrates, exemplifies, that we can endure whatever pain, whatever suffering, whatever hardship comes our way in life.

[30 : 59] And for some people, life is extremely hard. Life's not fair for anyone. Life is difficult at times for everyone.

But what this writer is saying, by looking beyond whatever it is we have to suffer, looking beyond it to the joy we will experience as God's children when we cross that finish line and enter into His presence.

That joy should motivate us. And Jesus' example of looking toward that with joy is one we need to follow. But also, we need to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus to experience His power.

Jesus empowers us day by day, even moment by moment, week by week, to run the race of faithful Christian living.

He empowers us by indwelling us with His Spirit. You know, the Holy Spirit is called at times in Scripture the Spirit of God, but He's also called at times the Spirit of Christ.

[32 : 07] Romans chapter 8, verse 9 is a good example of that. How does Jesus live with us today? Through the person of the Holy Spirit who indwells us.

The way God intends for us to live the faithful Christian life today is to be motivated by the example of Jesus and to be empowered by the Spirit of Jesus who lives in us.

If we will, we will be able to have the experience on an ongoing basis. Like the Apostle Paul when he made this statement, I can do all things through Him, Christ, who strengthens me.

You know, we'll never be able to live a faithful Christian life that honors God and brings joy and satisfaction to our own lives if all we do is dwell on our circumstances, dwell on our feelings, or what the world offers us and tempts us with.

Instead, what we've got to always remember, Jesus is the goal. He is to be our focus. We've got to follow His example. We've got to depend on His power.

[33 : 23] And we do need to look beyond our sufferings, our difficulties, to the joy that is in store for us when we cross the finish line and enter the presence of our Lord Jesus.

That is something that is going to happen one day. and throughout the Bible, that reward is spoken of in a way that should motivate us and encourage us.

Be faithful today. Be faithful in what is really a short span of life so that we can experience God's eternal blessings and rewards and joys forever.

That's what the Apostle Paul did. That's what enabled him to run the faithful Christian life or live the faithful Christian life, run the race to the very end.

And in the book of 2 Timothy, Paul is approaching the finish line. He knows that death is soon to come. And as he thought about that, as he was coming to the end, thinking about going into the presence of the Lord, listen to what he said.

[34 : 35] I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but all who have longed for his appearing.

When you approach the finish line of life one day, will you have that kind of confidence as you think about crossing over the line from this world to the next and entering into the presence of Jesus?

If you don't, I encourage you to do whatever is necessary right now to get that kind of confidence. If you're not a Christian, admit your sin, turn from it, put your trust in Jesus right now, call on him to save you.

If you are a Christian who's away from the Lord, if this message this morning has just beat you up, because everything that a Christian should be and do and trust, it's not what you're doing now.

Just admit that to God. Don't make excuses. Confess your sins. Seek his forgiveness. Experience his cleansing. Draw close to him. But I know that many Christians, many members of our church, you have that confidence.

[36 : 09] You have that confidence not because you've lived a perfect life, but because you are truly trusting in Jesus. You love him. You're trusting him. You're seeking to follow him, to serve him.

And the idea of entering into his presence brings a smile to your face. If that describes you, then thank the Lord for the way he has worked in you and just draw closer to him right now.

Express your thanks. Tell him how much you love him. Let's pray together. Father, help every Christian to see where they are along the race of faithful Christian living.

Help them to see, Father, if they have allowed maybe even good things to hinder their progress.

Help them to see if they have allowed certain sins to trip them up over and over and over again.

Help them, Father, to lay these things aside, to eliminate them, to not let them continue to get in the way, to rob them of a close relationship with you.

[37 : 31] Father, help us all to see just how serious we are about showing discipline, exercising discipline, enduring hardship, and persevering in living this faithful Christian life.

Help us to see that is necessary, but you will help us, enable us, by giving us the desires and the ability to be successful. Lord, help each of us to really see right now just how focused in we are on Jesus, looking to him as an example, but also looking to him for power.

Show us all how we need to respond, and help us, Father, to respond in such a way that we go on from here today, running the race of faithful Christian living for your glory, other people's good, and our own joy and satisfaction.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.