

A Race We Can Win

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[0 : 00] Well, excitement is really building, if you're a football fan right now. Just think about it. High school games begin this Friday night. Y'all are at Easley, right?

Okay. Three weeks from yesterday, college games begin. And I think the NFL begins on Thursday night, September the 7th. But I know everybody does not get into football.

There's millions of people who love basketball, baseball, soccer throughout the world, volleyball. Here it begins big.

A lot of people throughout this world, throughout this country, they're big into sports. Now today, we can know more about our favorite team and favorite athlete than in any other time in history because there's so much media coverage.

But I want everybody to understand, ESPN is not responsible for all the great interest there is in sports. For centuries, people have really gotten into athletic games of all kinds.

[1 : 18] Even the Apostle Paul in the first century. He was either a sports fan himself or he knew that a lot of people were because in several of his letters, he uses sports terminology, sports analogies.

For example, look on the screen. In his letter to the Corinthians, his first letter, he says, Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. He's writing to Christians and talking to them about living the Christian life. And it takes discipline.

It takes a lot of self-control. And he compared it to athletics, especially a runner, a boxer. He says in 2 Timothy 2.5, An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.

That was his way of saying it matters how you live. It matters how you do everything in life. It matters how you do your job. It matters how you play the game. The worst thing that could happen on Friday night, one of the worst things, is y'all are behind, last minute of the game, somebody breaks free, runs 50 yards for a touchdown for the winning score, and you look back up, and there's a yellow flag on the field.

[2 : 51] Somebody blocked somebody in the back. It matters how you play the game. It matters how you play the game of life. And that was Paul's way of stressing, it matters.

Now, the writer of the Hebrews, he is unknown, but he was aware of how people were interested in sports. And he writes in Hebrews chapter 12, beginning in verse 1, about the need for us to live a faithful Christian life, just like a runner, must discipline himself or herself, stay focused to run and win their race.

I want you to look at it with me. Hebrews chapter 12. We're going to read verses 1 and 2, and please keep your Bible open to that, because there will be times when it will not all be on the screen.

Hebrews chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. Look at it with me. 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, 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.

As we go through this message, I want you to think about living the Christian life in terms of a long-distance race. Living a Christian life is not a sprint.

[4 : 44] It's a long-distance race. It's like a marathon. But in this passage this morning, let's think more of a long-distance race, 5,000 meters, 10,000, something that could take place on a track with spectators.

We are instructed in these two verses to be disciplined, to be focused on the goal, to stay faithful no matter what.

No matter what it costs, and finish the race. Just like an Olympic athlete running a long-distance race would have to do.

Now the first thing I want us to notice about running the race of Christian living deals with some motivation. Look at it. We should be motivated by the example of people who have successfully completed the race.

Look at verse 1 in that first word, therefore. The writer is pointing back to a long list of men and women in chapter 11 that he was telling the Hebrew Christians about, men and women from the Old Testament, who were faithful.

[6 : 00] Now let me give you a little background of this letter. This letter to Hebrew Christians, Jewish Christians, who were having a hard time because they were being persecuted. You can read toward the end of chapter 10 of Hebrews, some of these people had been put in prison, or they knew people, Christians, who had been put in prison just because they were Christians.

Some of them had had their property taken away from them just because they were followers of Jesus. And so he's writing to people who are really struggling because it's costing them something to let everybody know they're Christians and to live like it.

Some of them are being tempted to just forget it all. As you read through this letter, it's obvious. He is trying to encourage them, don't quit.

Don't turn around and walk away from Christ as if you no longer believe in Him or want to have anything to do with Him. The writer is encouraging these people to stay faithful by pointing out how men and women in the Old Testament endured hard times and they remained faithful.

Some of them, they were even killed, but they would not renounce their faith. They ran their race, however long it was, to the very end and never quit.

[7 : 27] And now in verse 1, these Old Testament believers are what he calls a great cloud of witnesses. It's like these people who've gone before you and they've been faithful, well, they're in the stands and they're watching you as you run your race.

Think about it. He's saying these people are watching you. He's not saying these people who never played, people who were never in the race. This writer is saying to these Christians who are struggling, there's people in the stands, they have struggled and they persevered.

They hung in there. They didn't quit and now they are watching you. And the idea is if God enabled these people to be successful, he'll do the same for me.

Let me ask you guys, would it make a difference in how you practiced tomorrow if somehow or another last year's Clemson national championship team, Kane, circled the field and they watched you?

I bet there'd be less loafing. I bet there'd be more people just sucking it up and not talking about something hurting. You would do the best you've ever done because you know those guys are there and they know all about it.

[9 : 01] They have practiced and played in a lot more difficult circumstances than I have, longer than I have. they've endured the pain, the suffering that you do in practice and they've been successful.

They won the national championship. Same thing if South Carolina's women's basketball team came and watched you who are on Pickens High School's women's basketball team.

If North Carolina's players came to the guys' practice in basketball, you would sit up and take notice. You would do your best because that great cloud that's watching you, they've been there, they've done that, they've been successful and so you want to be successful in their eyes as well.

No matter what kind of hardships we experience as we seek to live an obedient Christian life, we can always be certain that there's a lot of people who've gone before us, not just in the Old Testament, maybe some of your parents or grandparents or somebody you just admired in your church in a day gone by, they had a hard life but they never quit, they never gave up, they never blamed God for what was going on.

They persevered, they were faithful and if you can look at them for some inspiration, that's what this writer's trying to say to us.

[10 : 34] No matter what we go through, others have been through worse. For example, back in chapter 11, Abraham was called to leave his home, his family and everything he ever had and go to a place that he didn't know where he was going to go and it says in chapter 11 that Abraham was sent to a place where he lived in tents and the idea is he never had a home.

God's call to Abraham's life was you leave home, you leave security, you leave everything you've ever known and I'm going to send you to a place and you're never going to have anything.

You're always going to be an alien in that place. But that's my plan for you. It was costly. Moses, look back in chapter 11, Moses actually grew up in a place of privilege.

He was the adopted grandson of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. But it tells us in that passage that Moses gave all that up. He renounced that place of position, that life of ease in order to identify with his own people, the Hebrew people who were slaves and eventually God used him to lead them out of slavery into the promised land.

The point is there's people around us, some in the Bible, some you know. They've been faithful. They were successful in doing what God called them to do because they were faithful.

[12 : 14] These in the Old Testament, Abraham and Moses for example. It's been thousands of years since they walked the face of this earth but we're talking about them this morning.

they are remembered. And one day, every Christian in this room, you will actually see those men and women listed in Hebrews chapter 11.

You'll get to talk to them and hear their stories firsthand about how life was hard but God gave me what I needed and I was able to be faithful. That's why they're in what some people call the hall of faith there in Hebrews chapter 11.

The next thing I want us to look at is also in verse 1. As important as it is to look around and find some inspiration from people who've been there and done that, it's more important now to understand if we're going to run this race of Christian living and be successful, we've got to be personally disciplined.

Look at it. We must discipline ourselves if we want to run well. Every successful runner, that's what he's talking about here, a track athlete.

[13 : 26] Every successful runner must train for their race. Every successful athlete must train, must discipline themselves. Well, that also applies to living a faithful and obedient Christian life.

Notice what it involves in verse 1. He says, we must lay aside every weight. Another way to translate that is or throw off everything that hinders. That literally refers to the bulk of the body.

Eliminate excess pounds is what he's talking about. Olympic runners, they don't carry any extra weight. They have any extra fat. Their skin, bone, and muscle. You think what it takes to be that.

Think up of the discipline in what you eat and how you work out, how you even rest. I want you to think and make this real personal now.

What hinders you? What causes you sometimes to fall as you seek to live a faithful Christian life? We're not talking about sinful things yet.

[14 : 34] It doesn't have to be anything bad. But we who are Christians, we want to, we want to be faithful. We want to know God's will. We want to do God's will.

We want to do what we know God wants us to do. But we don't a lot of times. We let things, we let people, we let a lot of things sort of pull us down.

And this writer is saying here, in writing to these people, writing to us today, let us also lay aside every weight. What's weighing or pulling you down?

It could be something good, but it's not good in what it's doing to you. For example, it could be a hobby that takes too much of your time. It could be a particular person that's in your life, and they're just a bad influence.

They make you worse, not better. This is sort of an aside now.

[15 : 39] When you're dating someone, when you're looking for someone you really want to get serious about, you think about marrying, ask yourself the question, am I a better person by being around them, by being influenced by them?

Are they helping, if you're a Christian, are they helping me to walk and follow Christ? Or, do they pull me down? Could be the kind of music you listen to, the movies, TV shows you watch, that for you, it just, you don't have the right kind of thoughts.

It just doesn't affect you in a positive way. Anything that drags us down spiritually is a hindrance that we've got to get rid of. You know, a lot of Christians say they don't have time to spend with the Lord in prayer and Bible reading.

Fact is, no one, me, you, no one in this room, no one you know can live a faithful Christian life without having a real relationship with God.

And the only way we can have a relationship with Him or anyone is to spend time with Him, talking to Him in prayer, listening to Him as He speaks from His Word.

[16 : 53] A lot of people say, I know that's true, but I just don't have the time to do that on a daily basis. Let me ask you this. Do you have time for Facebook and other forms of social media?

If you do, then your problem about the Bible and prayer is not a time problem. It's a priority problem. And I'm saying this because today, social media, it can be a great thing, it can be a positive thing, form of communication, smartphones, you can learn a lot, it's a lot of good that can come from it, but social media is a weight that is hindering many people's relationship with God and their actual real relationships with other people.

The main reason I'm bringing this one up as an example today, some of you saw this toward the end of last week. There was a house fire in Anderson County.

Three people were inside. They got out, but a 22-year-old man went back inside to retrieve his cell phone. And he didn't make it back out.

He died. He died. He died for a stupid cell phone. He was that addicted. It was that much of his life.

[18 : 23] I talked to someone after the first service this morning, after preaching this message. And they were telling me about a situation where a person was going to have to do a particular thing.

I don't want to give it away. A person told me they were going to have to be doing something. And they were instructed in order to do this test, do this thing you've got to do, you cannot have a cell phone.

You must leave it at home. Leave it with your parents. Leave it somewhere. And this person said, I can't do that. I cannot go anywhere in this world without my cell phone.

My cell phone is my lifeline. That's an addiction, folks. A smartphone can be a tool or it can be an addiction that is interfering in your own relationship with the Lord and your relationship with other human beings.

It's been a long time since I dated. But I can tell you this. If I went out with a girl and we sat down at a meal ordered, looking at the menu and she whips out that phone, I'm leaving.

[19 : 35] You can do what you want to. I didn't come to talk to you. I didn't come to look at you with your face down in that stupid phone. I challenge you guys, do that. Do that. Leave them.

Tell them to take that phone and call their mom and daddy to come get them. But let's reverse it now. I believe in equality. Ladies, if you go out with a guy, he's got his face in that, sneak out if you can before he even looks up.

Don't let him hear you. Just don't say a word. Go out and call somebody to come and get you. I'm making a lot of this because it is a serious problem that's interfering in people's actual human interaction and it is interfering in a lot of people's relationship with the Lord because they've got time for this but they don't have time for Him.

It is a hindrance to a lot of people's spiritual growth and a lot of people's social, real growth with other people face to face. We also see in verse 1 that we must discipline ourselves to throw off the sin which clings so closely or the sin that so easily entangles or the New Living Translation says the sin that so easily trips us up.

The idea here is of a runner stripping off as the Greek runners would do so that there would be nothing to hinder them in any way, to slow them down a step.

[21 : 07] Obviously all sin causes us to fall. Which sins do you find or you're a real stumbling block? And we all have them.

Every one of us, the most committed Christian in here, there's certain sins that appeal to you more than others. There's certain ways you are tempted. And I want you to stop for a moment now and identify what sin or sins is tripping you up.

Is it interfering in your running this race of faithful Christian living? Could it be gossip? Anger? Impatience?

Lust? Lying? Laziness? Alcohol or drug abuse? Just not trusting God in the details of your life. Whatever your particular sin is, you know what it is.

It's tripping you up. It's causing you to fall more times than you want to admit. If you're serious about wanting to be faithful to God and live the kind of life He's calling you to live, if you're serious about it, you've got to get rid of the things that are hindering you.

[22 : 20] You've got to confess and turn from the sin that's tripping you up. You can do that and God will forgive you. He'll give you a fresh start if there's a problem right now that you're dealing with.

1 John chapter 1 and verse 9 tells us this. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. God forgives.

God is a God of grace. And if we'll be honest with Him about what our problem is, what our sin is, truly confess it, turn from it, change your mind about it, hate it, and seek His forgiveness, He will forgive us just like that verse is saying.

It's a promise. It's a promise. What is it that, what is it that really you are battling is a temptation in your life.

I want you to understand no matter how powerful, how strong it may be in some temptations, sort of like sometimes they just grab us, shake us, demand that we give in.

[23 : 20] But we don't have to. God always provides a way of escape if we want it, if we'll look for it. I want you to look at what Paul said to the Corinthians about temptation.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. You've experienced, I've experienced no unique temptation. God is faithful. 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.

We can endure temptation. We can resist it. We can overcome it. God always provides a way of escape if we'll look for it, if we'll take it.

Notice one other aspect of discipline found in verse 1. He talks about running with endurance. The runner's got to have the attitude, I'm going to finish. I'm going to complete the race.

It doesn't matter how good a start he gets. In this analogy here, a long distance runner on the track, say it's 5,000 meters. That's what? About 12 and a half laps. It doesn't matter how strong he starts, how, if he even laps the field, the first few, if he quits in the 11th lap, he won't finish.

[24 : 40] He has no possibility to win. You've got to finish. You've got to stay the course is what he's saying.

This is true in our relationship with Christ. There's a lot of people, a lot of people, as children, as teenagers, even as adults, they make a profession of faith.

They may even be baptized. But they don't continue to trust Christ, to follow Christ. I want you to understand that is an indication that a person wasn't really a Christian to start with.

Because when God really and truly does a work in us to save us, he changes us, he puts his spirit in us, and God will never leave us alone. Look at how Paul describes this in Philippians 1, verse 6.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. What God starts in us, he's going to continue.

[25 : 46] There may be times that we fail him, as we're talking about how I go, that we fall. We give in to the temptation. But if the spirit of God lives within us, he will convict us, he'll cause us to want to confess our sin, to come back to the Lord and start all over again.

I want you to look at something else Paul said. It's not easy to live a Christian life. If anybody ever tells you it is, they don't know what they're talking about. There's a lot of verses I showed you at the beginning.

We're looking at one here. The Christian life requires discipline. It requires self-control. We have to work at it. It's not going to just happen. But I want you to see how we can be confident that we can work at it.

Look at what he says in Philippians 2.13. For it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

When God saves us, he puts his spirit in us and he will never leave us. God will give us the desire to be faithful, to resist temptation, to obey him.

[26 : 57] God will enable us to do that, but we've got to cooperate with him. We've got to eliminate the hindrances. We've got to turn from the sin.

We've got to do the acts of obedience that he calls us to do. You may have to close your mouth. He's telling you to quit saying things you're saying that you're not supposed to say. You may have to open your mouth and say some things he's wanting you to say to certain people.

God will enable us to be faithful. He will enable us to discipline ourselves and stay the course. Let's look at one more thing. One more thing about being faithful.

We must stay focused on our goal as we run. The Olympic runner runs with his eyes fixed ahead of him on the goal, on the finish line. He may be aware of people in the stands, but he's not looking.

He may be aware of other runners. He can sort of sense their presence, maybe see them out of the side of his eye. But he's not going to be turning and always just looking around.

[28 : 01] He's going to be focused on his goal. His goal is going to be the finish line. What this writer is telling us is we need to run with a clear focus and our focus is simple.

It's Jesus himself. Why would he say this? Because of who he is. Look at what it says. Verse 2, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Everything in the Christian life, everything in the Christian faith begins, continues, and ends with Jesus. Specifically, his death on the cross for our sins.

See, when Jesus died on the cross, he died in your place. He died to pay the penalty for my sins. It's like God took my sin and placed it on Jesus as he hung on the cross and Jesus cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

God had turned away from him in that moment and it's because he was bearing the full weight of our sin and experiencing the pain of hell, not going to the place, but experiencing the pain of hell because God was turning away from him.

[29 : 09] He was experiencing the wrath of God. He died for our sins. Just before he died, one of the last things he says was, it is finished. The penalty for sin had been paid.

He was buried. Three days later, he arose from the grave because God wanted everybody to understand, I've accepted his sacrifice. He arose from the grave and was seen over a period of 40 days by a lot of different people, different places.

That was God's way of verifying. My son, he's died on the cross, paid the penalty for your sins. He's risen from the grave. He is my son. He is the son of God. The penalty's been paid.

And the good news of the gospel is if we will admit our sin, put our trust in Jesus, call upon him to save us, he will. Now in keeping with this race imagery, think about Jesus.

He has cleared the path that we need to run to stay in our lane and be faithful in the race of life. Because of what he's done, look at it, he endured the cross despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[30 : 17] The cross was the lowest form of execution in the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire, only slaves and criminals were crucified. A Roman citizen could not be executed that way.

It was a torturous, humiliating way to die. But Jesus endured that. He disregarded the shame because he was fulfilling the plan of God.

He was fulfilling the way for us to be forgiven and made right with God. He did that, it says in verse 2, for the joy that was set before him. He looked beyond everything, everything that was terrible about that cross for the joy on the other side.

I know that you guys playing ball practices, a lot of times, it's just awful. Sometimes you just think the coaches, they got their training in a torture chamber, all the things they make us do.

But you hang in there. You do what you've got to do because you want to play on Friday night. You want to wear that uniform. You want to go out in front of all the people that's going to be in those stands.

[31 : 27] And you want to play football in that game so you endure whatever it has to do. There is joy before you on the other side of practice. There was joy on the other side of the cross for Jesus.

That's why he endured that. That's our example for enduring pain and hardship, suffering for the short time because we're going to experience an eternal reward waiting for us at the end.

You know, we're never going to live a faithful life that honors God and brings joy and satisfaction to ourselves if we just focus on the circumstances of today. If we just focus on how life bad is at various times.

we've got to learn to follow the example of Jesus and look beyond our circumstances. Look beyond how we feel and just think about what God, how God will reward us for being faithful as his son or daughter.

That's the attitude we've got to have in order to endure throughout this race of life, of Christian living. And I encourage you to look beyond the hardship, those of you who are going through hardship.

[32 : 46] There is more, there is better to come and it'll be yours for all eternity. If we want to live faithful Christian lives and please God, we need to look around and see success stories.

Look at some of the people in the Bible. Hopefully there's some people in your life who've been before you, they've been faithful and God is blessed in their life. Be inspired by that. But inspiration is just going to carry you so far.

In order to really and truly live the Christian life as God's called you to do and deep down you want to do if you're a Christian, you've got to learn to discipline yourself, to eliminate hindrances and distractions and any form of sin in your life.

Take the responsibility to discipline yourself, to cooperate with God as He works to change you and enable you to develop Christ-like character.

If we'll run the race of Christian living like this, we can be faithful. It doesn't mean it'll be easy. It doesn't mean that everything will happen the way you want it to happen in your life.

[33 : 56] But faithfulness is what pleases God. Faithfulness is how God determines success. Faithfulness is what makes us in this race of Christian living victorious.

Faithfulness by God's grace is what will enable us to experience an eternal reward at the end of this race.

let's pray together. Dear God, help us to see right now how we should respond in light of what you've said through your word and through your spirit to us individually.

Father, if there are people in this room who are not Christians, but they want to be, dear God, make it clear to them that if they will admit their sin and truly turn from it, change their mind about how they're living and put their trust in Jesus that He has taken their punishment, He paid the penalty for their sin when He died on the cross.

Help that person right now, dear God, to call upon Jesus to save them. Help that man, woman, young person to surrender control of their lives right now to Jesus as their Lord, as their ultimate leader.

[35 : 25] Father, if there are Christians in this room right now, you have identified things that are hindering them from faithfully living the life that God's called them to live.

Dear God, show them what they need to do. If there's sin to confess, if there are priorities to rearrange, if there are some changes in their lifestyle, in their relationships that need to be made, make it clear.

Help them, dear God, to make that kind of commitment. Not just right now, but every day. In an attitude of prayer, let's just all listen to the Lord and respond to Him.

If I could pray with you during this time, I'll be here at the front and would be happy to do that. Thank you.