

Reach for the Goal

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Hebrews 12:1-4

Sermon Series:
The Race to Run

The New Testament often portrays the Christian life as a race to run.

I've been mesmerized by the Beijing Olympics these last two weeks. I spent many a night watching this Olympic drama unfold. Last night was no exception. When I should have been working on my sermon, I was engrossed in the men's marathon.

My highlights wouldn't surprise you, watching Michael Phelps's improbable run of eight gold medals, especially his victory in the 100-meter butterfly by one 100-hundredth of a second, or Usain Bolt's three world records. There were courageous efforts, witnessing David Neville throw his body at the finish line to win the bronze metal in the 110-meter hurdles or Blake Russell, who ran the lead pack for most of the women's marathon, only to see her falter near the end, but gut it out to finish, or Lopez Lomong carrying the American flag in the opening ceremonies, one of the so-called "lost boys" of the Sudan.

There have also been some low lights to go with these highlights. I was disappointed there was so much attention paid to swimming, gymnastics and beach volleyball. I couldn't understand why there was so much coverage of beach volleyball until I read that NBC carries exclusive broadcasting rights to pro beach volleyball. I tired of seeing Michael Phelps's mother so often. I hoped the U.S. and China

wouldn't enter into a protracted Olympic medal race. Speaking of China, I regretted any mention of China's abysmal human rights record, especially with regard to its continued persecution of Christians.

These are subjects for another day. This month, we are using the backdrop of the Olympics to portray the Christian life as running a race. The New Testament often portrays the Christian life as a race to run. Earlier this summer, we reflected on Paul's words from 2nd Timothy as he looked back over his life, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race" (2 Timothy 4:7).

The Christian life, like a race, has a start line. It requires perseverance and strict training. Every race of faith has its share of challenges and obstacles. And, of course, there is a finish line.

Let's review the last three Sundays of sermons, since August is a vacation month for many here. On August 3rd, we examined the opening words of Hebrews: "Since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." The author pictures a vast stadium of believers who have competed and completed this race of faith. These witnesses are not dispassionate spectators, they've come to cheer for us as we run this race of faith.

On August 10th, we focused on the words, "Let us throw aside every weight and the sin that clings so

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closely.” Like elite runners whose uniforms are light weight and tight to the skin to reduce drag, we eliminate anything that hinders us from running this race. We wouldn't think of running a foot-race in heavy clothing and combat boots. What makes us think we can run this race of faith with the dead weight of sin strapped to us?

On August 17th, we considered the words, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Hebrews is addressed to people who have been Christians for some time but whose spiritual enthusiasm has begun to wane. Earlier in his letter, we read about believers who have become sluggish (6:12) and fallen away (2:1; 6:5). Some of them have stopped attending worship altogether (10:23-25).

The readers of Hebrews need a deeper understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. This brings us to today's reading: “Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith.” Don't look down while running; it becomes disorienting. Don't look back; it will knock you off course and slow you down.

The so-called “Mile of the Century” featured two of the great distance runners in 1954, Roger Bannister of England and Australia's John Landy. Until the 1950s, a sub-four-minute mile was considered an impossibility. Experts argued the human body couldn't withstand it. The human heart would simply burst under the strain. Both Bannister and Landy had broken the four-minute mile

barrier in separate races. This set the stage for the Mile of the Century showdown on August 9, 1954 at Vancouver's Exhibition Stadium. The race was watched by 35,000 people. An estimated 100 million people listened by radio.

Landy surged to the lead and set the pace for three laps. Bannister was content to run a few paces behind. On the final turn, Landy looked over his left shoulder to find Bannister. At that precise moment, Bannister surged ahead on Landy's right and sprinted to the finish line. Bannister crossed the line first in 3.58.8; Landy was clocked in 3.59.6.

There is a bronze statue in Vancouver depicting this climatic moment of Landy looking over his left shoulder as Bannister passes on his right. It's taken from a photograph of this fabled moment. Landy later quipped, “While Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, I am probably the only one who turned into bronze for looking back.”

Don't look back. Don't look down. “Look to Jesus, the pioneer of our faith.” Jesus is likened to a pioneer who blazes the trail of faith for us.

In his book *Western Theology*, Wesley Seeliger makes a plea for what he calls Pioneer Faith, in which God, the trail boss, and Jesus, the scout, lead the church, a covered wagon always on the move, as the minister dishes up for these pioneers fresh meat brought in by the Holy Spirit. He contrasts Pioneer Faith with Settler Religion in which God, the mayor, and Jesus, the sheriff, run the church as a courthouse while

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the minister-banker protects the interests of the religious establishment.

His illustration may be a bit campy, perhaps even heretical, but he makes his point. Jesus is our scout and trailblazer. God doesn't intend us merely to be a church in residence but a church on the move, led by our pioneer Jesus.

"Look to Jesus, who is not only our pioneer, but our perfecter in the faith. Jesus has run this race of faith to perfection from start to finish. He is our starter and finisher, our beginning and end, our Alpha and Omega."

Our author intentionally uses Jesus' human name rather than his divine title to focus our attention on the race Jesus ran on earth. "Look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross and disregarded its shame."

The Roman Empire executed prisoners on crosses to shame them. You challenge the mighty Roman Empire and your shameful end will be a cross. Cicero called the cross "the tree of shame." The cross leaves its victims without a shred of dignity. A shameful death was the greatest indignity for ancient people, since it afforded them no opportunity to regain honor after death.

Jesus is not beholden to the court of public opinion about the shame of the cross. Jesus knows that the exaltation that comes as a consequence of enduring the cross is worth any shame and pain. Athletes disregard the pain of

training for the exaltation of competing in races. Expectant mothers disregard the pain of childbirth for the joy of giving birth to a child.

We've reached the point in this sermon where it's appropriate for you to ask, "So what?" So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

You are invited to run a race of faith. Maybe you've been watching other people run this race of faith and you're ready to run this race yourself. Others, like a cloud of witnesses, have already run this race before you. Now it's your turn to take the baton and run the race set before you.

Each of us has his or her race to run. Indeed, as the author of Hebrews expresses it, "There is already a course marked out for us" (12:2). Maybe the only race you're running right now is a rat race. Some of you are ready to step to the start line and run this race of faith.

So, where to begin? "Look to Jesus, our pioneer and trailblazer." Start with him. Start by opening your life to him. When I close this sermon with prayer a few moments from now, you can pray along with me to invite Jesus Christ to take up residence in your life.

Look to Jesus. He can be your perfecter. Jesus is able to finish what he starts. Paul writes, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

Stop obsessing over your bank accounts or what people think about you or what tomorrow will bring.

Look to Jesus. Study his life. Get to know him. Indeed, entrust your life to him.

Some of you have been running this race of faith for some time now. But, like the people to whom Hebrews is addressed, you've become fatigued. You are losing your passion for running this race. Some of you are about to give up. Look to Jesus who successfully ran this race from start to finish, "So you will not grow weary or lose heart" (12:3).

The Complete Runner website offers 100 tips for beginning runners. Its suggestions are helpful not only for novice runners but would-be Christians.

Focus on the goal. Don't compare yourself to elite runners. Run within yourself. Don't dwell on past failures. Don't look back. "One thing I do," Paul writes, "forgetting what lies behind and straining for what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God in Christ Jesus has called me (Philippians 3:14).

Find a running partner. It's much harder to skip a run when someone else is depending on you. I've talked in previous sermons about the value of finding friends who can run this race of faith with us. God doesn't intend the Christian life to be lived alone. One of our primary objectives as a church is helping people deepen spiritual friendship.

Accept setbacks. Don't expect every run to be better than the last one. As you run this race of faith, you will invariably experience plateaus in your progress and

tough days along the way. The Christian life is not a sprint, it's a marathon extending over the course of your life. The key is building your endurance. "Look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."

Focus on the goal.

Find a running partner.

Accept setbacks.

