

INTRODUCTION

After spending three months in Hebrews 11, we come to what I believe is the climax of Hebrews. We still have a lot of important material to cover in Chapters 12 and 13, but this is the pinnacle of the logical argument the writer has been developing. After talking about the great faith of heroes of the Bible, we discover we are part of God's Hall of Fame, and that we're all in a footrace.

Many of you are serious runners, and some of you are competitive runners. But even if you aren't running much these days, when you were a kid, you were probably involved in a few footraces. It usually begins with a challenge like, "Last one to the pine tree is a rotten egg!" And you took off running.

When I was a kid, I loved to run. My sister, Judy, is three years older than me. She had long legs and she was athletically gifted. We used to race against each other when I was a kid and she would always win the race. It really frustrated me, so I dreamed about the day when I could outrun my big sister. I finally started growing and when I was about 11 or 12 I could almost beat her. Then one day, I was pretty sure that I could take her. I said, "Come on Judy, let's race." She probably realized I was going to win, too. So she turned up her nose and said, "It's not lady-like to race against you." And she walked away. So I must admit that I have NEVER beaten my sister in a footrace. And I guess I'm okay with that.

We live in a sports-crazed culture. There are hundreds of sports channels and you can live-stream thousands of sporting events. When this letter was written, people in the Roman Empire were also sports-crazy. They built huge coliseums, and tracks the length of ten football fields for chariot races. There were two great sporting events each year: The Olympic Games, held on Mt. Olympus and the Isthmian games held in Corinth.

They competed in wrestling, boxing, javelin, and discus throwing. But the most popular events were the different length footraces. Just as our sports stars become rich and famous, that also happened in the time of the New Testament. As we come to Hebrews 11, the writer employs an athletic metaphor to describe the Christian life. We are going to talk about the race of your life. As we turn to our scripture remember that you never start reading a passage with a "therefore" so let's get a running start in Hebrews 11:40.

Hebrews 11:40—12:2 NIV. "God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. 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 for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The Bible gives us many word pictures to describe the Christian life, and a race is one of the best analogies. We all start the race of life when we're born. The only trouble is, we're running

in the wrong direction. We think we're going in the right direction, but the Bible says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to destruction." (Proverbs 14:12 NIV) They are going the wrong way, but Jesus talked about the right way. He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6 NIV) At some point we hear the Gospel, and we place our faith in Jesus. We repent and turn around and start running in the right direction. So once you turn to Jesus, and start on the right way, then your life involves following Jesus. That's the race. And then one day, we will all reach the finish line.

So, all of us are in a race. The main question is, "Are you running in the right direction?" And the next question is, "If you are following Jesus, how WELL are you running the race?" I want to share four keys about running well.

1. LISTEN TO THE WITNESSES WHO SURROUND US

The Bible says, "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." These witnesses are all the people of faith we've just mentioned, and many others. There's Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab—there are thousands! This crowd also includes all the people of faith who have gone to be with the Lord. They are cheering us on.

I used to visualize a huge stadium, like at one of the Olympic Games, and we're down on the track running in circles, and they are filling the stands. However, as I've grown older I have come to believe that the Christian life isn't just running in a bunch of endless circles. It's an exciting cross-country race. There are hills and valleys, hard pavement, and mud holes to splash through. And the people of faith are lining both sides of the trail cheering us on. They are encouraging us to be faithful because as Hebrews 11:40 noted, they realized that without us, they would not be made complete.

So as you run the race of your life, I want to share four race tips with you.

Race Tip #1: The fans of faith are all on our side.

They are like heavenly cheerleaders. When I played high school football, I could hardly hear the cheerleaders on the sidelines. That's probably why I liked basketball better. It was inside and the players could see and hear the cheerleaders. At my school when you went to free-throw line the cheerleaders would shout, "David, David, he's our man, if he can't do it; no one can. Sink it! Sink it! Sink it! David, sink it!" I kinda' liked the sound of that; so I tried my very best to make that free throw.

In much the same way, these faithful saints are cheering us on. "Keep running! Stay faithful! Don't quit! Keep the faith!"

This brings up a question about people in Heaven. I've often been asked, "Can our loved ones in Heaven see us? Are they aware of every detail of what's happening in our lives?" The Bible doesn't directly answer this question, but I agree with most evangelical scholars who point out

that Hebrews 12:1 is not a literal scene, it is a powerful metaphor. It is literally true that the faithfulness of Abraham, Moses, and David testify to us about staying faithful. But I don't think those in Heaven are aware of everything that's happening on earth. The main reason I believe that is because they are otherwise engaged. Their focus and attention is on Jesus, the King of Heaven, not what's happening here. And they are engulfed in the celestial atmosphere of joy and praise. So, I guarantee that in Heaven they don't sit around and watch Fox News or CNN all day! If they were aware of everything happening in your life, you might be tempted to try to contact them, or even to pray to them.

Pastor Erwin Lutzer once had an eight-year-old girl ask him a simple question about Heaven. She said, "Pastor, can I ask Jesus to give a message to my grandpa in Heaven?" He smiled and said, "I'm sure you can ask Jesus anything, my dear." Then he said he was struck with the profound truth of her question. As Christians, we don't talk to people in heaven and ask them to give a message to Jesus, whether they are saints, the Virgin Mary, or your godly Aunt Gertrude. We don't pray to people in heaven; we should pray only to God.

Those who are now in Heaven, including our loved ones, lived lives of faith. They are active witnesses who encourage us with their words, not passive witnesses who are watching us. What are the words they use to cheer us on? There are plenty of them. "The three Hebrew Amigos were facing a fiery furnace, and they said, "Our God is able to deliver us from the fire. But if not, we will still worship and serve only him." In the middle of terrible suffering Job said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him." I still hear the words of my dad after he had gotten his final report that his cancer had metastasized to multiple organs in his body. He said, "Son, for a Christian, there are a whole of things that are worse than dying." Listen to these faithful testimonies as you run the race!

So the first key is to listen to the testimonies of the witnesses who have already run the race we're running.

2. THROW OFF THE WEIGHTS THAT SNAG US.

The next three race keys all begin with the phrase "Let us." Verse one continues, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." So just imagine you're getting ready to watch a television broadcast of a men's 400-meter race. The runners are kneeling to get into their starting blocks. As you look down the line of runners, they are all dressed in shorts and thin shirts. They have the latest high-tech track shoes. But then, there is one runner who looks unusual. He is dressed as if he is going snow skiing. He's wearing a thick North Face Jacket over a thick ski bib. He's wearing those bulky ski boots that you snap into the skis. He's wearing thick gloves with ski poles in each hand. You don't know exactly who will win the race, but you have a pretty good idea who is going to come in last. The starter yells, "Take your marks! Set!" And he fires the starter's pistol. They are off like a flash—all except one. The guy in the ski outfit is lumbering down the track with his ski poles swinging. After a few steps, one of the poles gets between his legs and he falls into a heap onto the track.

Of course, that would never happen at a track meet. But that's exactly what is taking place in

the lives of many Christians who are trying to run the race of faith. They are weighed down with extra baggage, and there are things in their lives that keep them from running well.

Race Tip #2: Unconfessed sin will trip you up!

As you are running along, sin can cause you to stumble. It's interesting that there is a definite article before the word sin. It's not just sin in general; it's THE sin that so easily entangles you. Many scholars look at this verse and suggest that for each believer, there is usually one particular sin that continues to trip up a Christian. Is there some sin in your life that keeps tripping you up over and over? It could be the sin of lust that leads to pornography addiction. It could be the sin of worry that leads to fear. It could be the sin of gossip that leads to character assassination. It could be the sin of pride that leads to a sense of arrogance. It could be the sin of the love of money that leads to uncontrolled greed.

Would you stop right now and ask the Holy Spirit to examine your life? Ask Him to point out to you THE SIN that so easily entangles you. In order to run the race well, you must be willing to constantly surrender to the conviction of the Holy Spirit and confess that sin and turn from it. If you're a Christian, all your sins, have been placed under the cleansing blood of Jesus. This sin won't send you to hell, but it will trip you up and prevent you from running the race well.

You must learn to see sin as God sees sin. God hates sin, but He loves the sinner. Sin was the murder weapon that killed His only son. Unconfessed sin can damage your life and those around you. Remember, sin will take you farther than you ever wanted to go; sin will keep you longer than you ever wanted to stay; and sin will cost you more than you ever wanted to pay.

The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9 NIV) During the race of your life there are times when you may stumble and fall. That's when you should confess your sin and get back into the race. Just make sure you aren't carrying with you that sin that so easily entangles you. Like a good runner, throw off those things that snag you.

3. PUSH THROUGH THE WEARINESS THAT SLOWS US.

The next "let us" says, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." This letter was written to Hebrew Christians who were growing tired of the persecution and pain and were considering giving up and going back to their old religion. It's also written to all of us who sometimes grow weary and tired in the race of life. And there are times in the Christian life when we get tired. We don't just get tired; we're like the old Alabama housewife who once said to me, "I'm tarred. I real tarred. I feel like I been ironing all day on a low ironing board in a pair of high-heeled shoes." Now that's tarred.

Kids, if you don't get that cultural reference, back in the olden days, houses used to have ironing boards and people ironed their own clothes instead of sending them to the cleaners.

Everyone gets weary and tired. Even Jesus got tired and looked for opportunities to get away from the crowds. He suffered such fatigue that when He was in a boat in the middle of a storm, He was curled up under the bow asleep. So as we run the race of life, we are going to get weary.

Race Tip #3: The Christian life is an ultra-marathon; not a 50-yard dash!

I've met many Christians who started out running fast for God and then dropped out. They got so excited for Jesus but then they burned out. I heard someone say, "It's not how high you jump when you get saved, it's how straight you walk when you come down."

The Christian life is not a sprint; it's a marathon. How many of you have ever run a marathon or a half-marathon? You know the importance of pacing yourself so you can finish the race. The history of the marathon comes from the legend of how a Greek soldier, Pheidippides ran about 25 miles from Marathon to Athens to announce the defeat of the Persians. After making that long run, he was so exhausted he fell over dead.

The marathon was resumed in the modern Olympics in 1894 and the distance was 40 kilometers, which is a little less than 25 miles. But at the London Olympics in 1908, Queen Alexandria wanted the children at Windsor Castle to see the beginning of the race, so it was run from there to the royal box in the Olympic Stadium. That distance was 26.2 miles and since that time, that has been the official length of a marathon. U.S. Runner Johnny Hayes won that marathon in London with a time of 2 hours and 26 minutes.

The world record for the fastest marathon was set in 2014 in Berlin by the Kenyan runner, Dennis Kimetto with a record of 2 hours, 2 minutes and 57 seconds. That's almost thirty minutes faster than the 1908 marathon. Many track experts believe one day someone will run a sub 2-hour marathon.

But my favorite Olympic marathon story is that of the slowest marathon in history. At the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Japanese runner, Shizo Kanakuri, started the race, but after about twenty miles he became sick and passed out, so he never finished the race. Fifty years later a Swedish journalist pursued the story and brought Shizo to Stockholm to finish the race. At age 76 he walked the remaining distance and then sprinted the last hundred yards to finish his marathon. So his official time for the marathon was 54 years, 8 months, 6 days, 8 hours, and 32 minutes. He said, "It was a long race. Along the way, I got married, had six children and ten grandchildren."

I like that guy. His long race represents our race. This spiritual marathon is going to take decades and God requires perseverance to overcome the weariness that comes. Distance runners speak of a point in a long race where the "hit the wall." There's not a real wall there, but suddenly they are so tired they think they can't finish the race. Sadly that's where some drop out. But the best runners know to just keep on putting one foot in front of the other; to keep on breathing, and before long they push through that wall of weariness.

Some of you may think you're up against that wall. You're tired. You're worn out. Just keep on running. Just keep on praying, just keep on reading the Word; just keep on worshipping; just keep on sharing your faith—with perseverance you can push through that wall.

So here's the final key to running well.

4. LOOK TO THE WINNER WHO SUSTAINS US!

And now we come to the theme of our study of Hebrews, "Eyes on Jesus." The Bible says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross."

The term "fix our eyes on Jesus" means that we stare intently at Him. A good runner always keeps his or her eyes on the finish line. They don't turn to look at the other runners or they can lose precious time.

Another reason I believe those witnesses cheering us on aren't looking at us is because I believe they are also looking at Jesus. And it's important to understand that we aren't running for the applause of those in the grandstands. We are running for the approval and the applause of only One, the Lord Jesus Christ. They are cheering us on, but we have eyes only for Jesus.

Race Tip #4: Jesus is the starter, the pace runner, and the finish line

He's the author and the finisher—the perfecter. That means He is there at the starting line. When you place your faith in Christ, Jesus says, "Okay, let's run!" So what is the finish line for a Christian? It's not Heaven. The finish line for a Christian is Jesus. It's seeing Jesus and knowing Jesus. And Jesus is there with us helping us to keep a healthy pace as we run. He is there every step of the way.

Don't put your eyes on Abraham, Moses, David, or your loved one in Heaven. Put your eyes on Jesus.

Paul wrote about this in Philippians 3. "I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14 NIV) That's a picture of a runner leaning toward the finish line, giving it all he's got for the final push. I have often prayed, "God, when you finally call me home, I want to be found sprinting over the finish line."

Bonus Race Tip: Jesus isn't just waiting for us at the finish line; he is running with us giving us his strength!

Last August there was a high school cross-country race in Macon, Georgia. Just a few feet from the finish line, one of the runners staggered and fell. Luke Hudson, a sophomore at Providence Christian Academy, stopped and helped this fellow competitor finish the race. I was so moved

by this story, because I believe there are times that Jesus has to carry us. Isaiah 40:11 says that God, "Gathers His lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart." You can't run this race without His strength. As you run, keep chanting, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"

There's a race marked out just for you. Run it well. Run it with patience. Get rid of the junk and sin that trips you up. We aren't competing against each other; so if you see a struggling runner, help them along. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

CONCLUSION

I love that song Steve Green has sung right here where I'm standing. "We're pilgrims on the journey of the narrow road; And those who've gone before us line the way; Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary; Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace. Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses; Let us run the race not only for the prize; But as those who've gone before us; Let us leave to those behind us; The heritage of faithfulness; Passed on through godly lives. Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful; May the fire of our devotion light their way; May the footprints that we leave; Lead them to believe and the lives we live inspire them to obey; Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful!" (Words by John Mohr)

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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