

Run the Race!

There was a man named John who wanted to be a writer. He wrote his first book and submitted it to a publisher. Sometime later he received a rejection slip. He tried again. He got another rejection slip. He tried again and got another. 100, 200 rejections – most people would have given up. He received more than 700 rejection slips until finally, in 1932, his first book was published. John Creasey went on to write over 600 books under 17 pseudonyms and founded the Crime Writers' Association in 1953.

Now that's persistence!

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Our topic is Run the Race!

1. It's a marathon

We're in a race.

I'm sure you've heard this before.

The race we're in isn't a sprint; it's a marathon.

Marathons aren't about looking great for 100m and then doing the Usain Bolt pose.

It's not about starting with a burst and then flickering out.

I've seen plenty of those; I'm sure you have too.

I call them shooting stars.

What happens when you see a shooting star?

You say, "Oh, wow! Look at that."

The person next to you turns to look, and says, "Look at what?"

Because it's fizzled out.

I've seen people like that.

I would consider them to be better than I am.

Maybe smarter, more talented, stronger, more naturally gifted.

They burst onto the scene.

And it seems that five minutes later you're wondering where they've gone.

Because they're not anywhere.

Matthew 24:13 But he who endures to the end shall be saved.

Marathons are all about lasting the distance.

Our marathon is day after day after day...

Anyone can start something.

Not everyone lasts the distance.

What stops people from lasting the distance?

Here's the problem.

2. There are obstacles

Why do people not finish the course?

2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

What stops people from doing that?

1. They hit the wall

Marathon runners sometimes hit a wall.

What does that mean?

I looked this up, and discovered:

Your body stores glycogen (in the form of glucose).

It's stored in your liver and muscles for energy.

In a long run, when your body gets low on glycogen, your brain says, "That's it. That's enough."

This generally happens around the 30 km mark.

But that's okay; your body has fat reserves.

Some of us more than others!

And as your body starts to access its fat reserves, there is sudden fatigue.

The athlete's legs feel like dead weights.

Runners say that it feels like running through quicksand.

According to marathonhandbook.com, "You experience very negative feelings with a voice telling you repeatedly that you can't keep going and should quit."

Wow! Who's ever felt just a little bit like that in life?

I experienced a little of what it means to hit the wall. No, I didn't enter a marathon.

I'd been fasting. The last food I ate was the Tuesday evening 7-8pm.

The next morning - Wednesday - I went for my usual walk. No problem.

I'm used to walking on an empty stomach. But that day and night, I had nothing but water.

So the Thursday morning, I woke up feeling weak.

I started out on my walk, got a few hundred metres, and started to experience the lack of glycogen in my system.

My legs were weak, and my brain was saying, "I can't do this."

I thought, "Just a little bit further. Just a little bit further."

I managed to complete the whole walk.

Here's the advice the same website gives for when you hit the wall.

See if you can see anything that applies to the marathon we're called to run.

First, find one positive thing and focus on it.

They used to say, "Count your blessings, name them one by one."

And we've got so many of those.

We'll talk later about what Jesus focused on.

Second, find someone to run with and talk to them to distract yourself from the pain.

You're part of a community, a family.

If you want to do everything all by yourself, seriously you're insane.

It was never meant to be that way.

I was watching a doco. The narrator was talking about how flamingos survive because they are part of the flock.

They do everything together: eat together, hang out together, take off together.

It's a survival mechanism.

The narrator said this: Be an individual, step out of the flock, and life could be over very quickly.

It's true, and it's true for us too.

We have to stick close to one another.

If you want to go it alone, that's up to you.

But you won't thrive.

You may not even survive.

Because God created us for community.

In fact, every metaphor used in the NT to describe the church, is all about community.

The church is an army, and you're one of its soldiers.

The church is a body, and you're one of its members.

The church is a building, and you're a living stone.

So find someone to run with and share the journey with them.

It will distract you from the pain.

Third, focus on putting one foot in front of the other to keep moving forward. Forget about pace.

Just keep going, no matter how slowly.

Hitting the wall is a big thing.

But you can do it, by the grace of God.

2. Another thing that hinders people from completing the race is sin.

Hebrews 12:1 ... let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

Can you imagine running any kind of race, let alone a marathon, carrying a back-pack full of bricks?

The Scripture says, "lay aside every weight."

What's the weight?

He goes on to say, "the sin which so easily ensnares us."

If we have undealt with sin in our lives, it will most certainly interfere with our ability to run the race.

3. Distractions hinder people from running the race.

What sorts of distractions?

Jesus nailed it: listen to this.

Mark 4:18-19 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

Let's pick one of those: the desires for other things.

Imagine a marathon here, and it goes right through the centre of town.

And you're in it.

And you're jogging up through the main street and you see it in a shop window.

And you think: Wow! I love that T-shirt. What a great design. I've got to get one of those.

So you go in and try a couple on, and buy your T-shirt.

On the way out of the shop, you see a Jag parked outside, and think: How did I miss that? I have always wanted one of those. It's so beautiful.

I like what Jeremy Clarkson said on an episode of Top Gear: There's something about being in a restaurant with your friends, and being able to say, "I'll just go get the Jag."

I'd have to agree with that.

It sounds so much better than, "I'll go get the Mini, shall I?"

I was in a Jag when I was about 11 years old.

I remember thinking, "Wow, this car is so quiet. I can't hear the engine at all."

Then he started the car.

But what are the chances that you'll win that race?

So many distractions!

What are the chances that you'll even finish the race?

The apostle Paul had someone on his team like that.

The apostles didn't go from place to place by themselves.

They weren't stupid.

They understood the value of community.

So towards the end of his letter to the Colossians, he sends greetings from the members of the apostolic team.

Greetings from Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, and then verse 14.

Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you.

I want you to remember that name - Demas.

Because three or four years later, Paul is in prison, and he writes the last letter he will ever write.

2 Timothy 4:10: for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica...

Isn't that one of the saddest things?

Demas loved this present world, and deserted.

Maybe that's why, in this same letter, Paul warns Timothy not to entangle himself with the affairs of this life.

This world has good things to distract us with.

So be careful with them.

But life has a way of throwing negatives at us too.

And they can be very distracting.

Issues at work / with our families / with friends / with finances.

The apostle Paul faced some major things.

When he and Silas were in Philippi, they were arrested, stripped, beaten with rods, thrown in jail, and fastened in the stocks.

Think that could have been a distraction?

And yet, he and Silas praised the Lord.

And led an entire family to the Lord.

So how do we stay on track?

What's the great secret to lasing the distance?

3. Keep your eyes on the prize

Our son entered into a marathon, in Canada; one with a difference.

It was a wine marathon.

They set out, and along the way, they stopped regularly to taste different wines – 25 kilometres of it!

I know; it would be interesting to know how many didn't make it to the end.

But every so often a bus came back to pick up any stragglers and deposit them at the next wine tasting point.

The organisers were concerned that runners might get the wrong impression.

They said up-front, "If you win the race, you missed the point."

Why do people enter races like the marathon?

Winners of the World Marathon Majors were taking home \$250,000.

That's quite an incentive.

But not everyone gets cash prizes in races.

Back in ancient Greece, if you won the race, do you know what you got?

An olive wreath. Yay!

When the Olympic Games restarted in Athens, in 1896, after a gap of over 1,100 years, there were 25 entrants in the marathon.

Twenty-one of them were Greek!

But for a lot of the race, the three leaders weren't Greek.

But when the runners got close to Athens, the American, then the Frenchman, then the Australian, all collapsed because it was so fast.

A Greek named Spiridon Louis won – he was seven minutes ahead of number two – and here's what happened.

Prince George and Prince Constantine ran around the track with him to the finish line.

They carried him on their shoulders to the royal box where their father, King George, congratulated him.

In the stadium, as well as in the hills around them, the crowds went wild.

There was cheering and sobbing. Women threw their jewellery at his feet.

All this for an earthly race.

People are motivated by the thought of reward.

And God is mindful of this.

Heb 12:2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Even Jesus Himself was able to endure the cross by thinking about what was to come after the cross.

1st June, 1965 a 4-metre boat named Tinkerbelle left Falmouth, Massachusetts.

Its destination was Falmouth, England, and it would be the shortest boat ever to cross the Atlantic.

Its pilot was Robert Manry who felt that ten years working at a desk was enough.

Manry wasn't afraid of doing the trip, but he was afraid of those who would try to talk him out of it.

So he only told his wife Virginia and some relatives.

What a journey!

He experienced sleeplessness, tasteless food, the difficulties of trying to cross shipping lanes without getting run over, and such loneliness as led to hallucinations.

His rudder broke three times.

Storms washed him overboard and he was only saved by the rope around his waist.

Finally, after 78 days alone at sea, he sailed into Falmouth, England.

He had fantasised about this and what he would do when he got there.

He would check into a hotel, have a quiet dinner.

Then next morning find out if the Associated Press might be interested in his story.

Was he in for a surprise! Word had spread far and wide.

Amazingly, 300 vessels escorted him into port with their horns blasting, and 47,000 people screamed and cheered him to the shore.

What do you think was going through his mind?

The 78 days of hardship, sacrifice, danger and turmoil were suddenly worth it.

My mother loved and served God.

She eventually died of lung cancer.

She spent the last 4½ months of her life bedridden in our house.

Moments before she died, she suddenly lit up and said, "I can see the finish line and the crowd is on their feet."

Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...

There's your welcoming committee right there.

If you follow Jesus, God's got something in store for you that will make all your tough times worthwhile.

Here's just one of those things.

Philippians 3:20-21 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

A body that will be like Jesus' body.

Immortal, incorruptible, no more pain, no more wrinkles / sickness / weakness.

Powerful, glorious bodies.

Theologians call this glorification.

The bodies of the greatest athletes in the world will not compare to our bodies.

We'll all be doing the Usain Bolt pose!

In that moment of transformation, every pain, every disappointment, every bit of suffering, will have all be worth it.

No wonder Paul says (Rom 8:18): For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us.

Friends, run the race!

When you get there, you'll see.

It will have been worth every bit of suffering you've experienced in this life.