

HOW TO RUN WITH ENDURANCE (Hebrews 12:1-3)

His name was Cliff Young. He was a potato farmer from Australia. At the age of 61 he entered his first-ever ultra-marathon. He had run a few marathons before, but this was an ultramarathon. It wasn't your normal 26.2-mile race that can be completed in a matter of a few hours. No, this race would take the runners from Sydney to Melbourne, a distance of 544 miles. It often took between six and seven days to complete.

On the day of the race, when everyone else showed up wearing their Nikes or Adidas running shoes and fashionable running shorts, Cliff walked up to the registration table wearing bib overalls and work boots with goulashes over the boots because he thought it might rain. He chose not to wear his dentures because he said they rattled when he ran. I say "ran" but his running style was more of a shuffle.

The organizers of the event thought he was a spectator not a competitor. Onlookers thought it was a joke. They would point and laugh at the oddly dressed man.

At the end of the day, Cliff was well-behind, but unlike the other runners, Cliff didn't stop to sleep. The rest of the field would run for 18 hours and then sleep for a few hours before resuming the race. For the entirety of the race, however, Cliff only stopped to use the bathroom and to eat.

To everyone's amazement, Cliff won the race, and he didn't just break the record time in the race from Sydney to Melbourne, he smashed it. He completed the race in 5 days, 15 hours, and four minutes. The second-place finisher was 9 hours and 56 minutes behind Cliff.

Cliff was awarded \$10,000 for winning the race. He didn't know there was prize money involved. Only six entrants actually completed the race, and Cliff didn't feel good about taking the prize money since the others had worked as hard as he had; so, Cliff shared the prize money with the other five finishers, and he took nothing for himself.

How did a 61-year-old accomplish this amazing feat? Cliff grew up on a 2,000-acre sheep ranch? His dad couldn't afford horses; so, Cliff had to run around the ranch checking on the sheep. He was able to run the ultramarathon with endurance because he had been training for it from childhood.

The Christian life is an ultramarathon. The goal isn't to finish first. The goal is to finish. It is going to take endurance to keep running until either Jesus comes back or we go to be with Him.

The author of Hebrews, in 12:1-3, teaches us "How to Run with Endurance." Let's read our text. In our passage, I find three things we are to do that will help us to run and keep running.

Get Ready

We are told in v. 1 that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. By *cloud*, the author means *a large host, a great number*. Who are these witnesses?

Let's keep in mind that our passage comes right after chapter 11 in which the author portrays men and women from their history who had exhibited great faith. He had written

of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the people of Israel, Rahab and the things they did by faith. Then, lacking the time and space to describe their exploits, the author simply mentions by name Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. Then, without naming them, the author invokes the stories of others who had distinguished themselves by their faith. Some experienced great victories because of their faith. Others endured great hardship due to their faith.

These were the heroes of the Jewish people. And these are the ones who comprise the great cloud of witnesses along with countless others who have shown themselves to be men and women of faith.

In what sense are they witnesses? I do not think that author wants us to view them as spectators who are watching us live our lives. Nowhere else in Scripture does the Bible teach that the people in heaven are watching us.

It seems that we like to believe that because sometimes when someone we love dies, we say that they have gone on to heaven to watch over us or to watch out for us.

We have no reason to believe that is the case. The Bible doesn't teach that. Personally, I think they are far more interested in the sights, sounds, and events of heaven than they are of the earth. They have already been here, done that.

I remember when my daughter was born. A week or so later, family showed up at our house to meet Bethany. I remember them sitting on the sofa looking at pictures of my daughter when there she was in the same room. I thought to myself, "This is odd. This is strange. Why would you concern yourself or bother looking at pictures when the real thing is right there in front of you?"

All that is on this earth is but a pale reflection of the glory of heaven. Those who are there will be far more interested in looking at, listening to, and experiencing the glory of heaven than they will be at paying attention to what is going on down here on this pale, blue dot that circles a second-rate star on the edges of a galaxy that is just one of billions upon billions of galaxies in our vast universe.

These witnesses are witnesses not in the sense that they are watching us. Rather, they are witnesses in that their lives are speaking to us. **We get ready for our race by listening to them and what they have to teach us.** When we listen to the life and testimony of a Noah, or an Abraham, or a Moses, or your saintly grandmother, or your Christian friend who has stayed the course, how can we not be inspired to run our race with endurance. We, too, will want to persevere in our race.

The first thing to do in getting ready is to listen to the witnesses who surround us. Pay attention to their stories and the lessons that can be learned from them.

There is a second thing to do in getting ready for our race. It is found in the second half of v. 1. **We are to lay aside every weight that might hinder us.** In the latter part of the second half of the first verse, the author makes his meaning clear. By *weight* he means *sin*. The sin that clings to us will keep us from moving freely. Unconfessed sin, sin of which we have not repented, sinful habits will keep us from running with endurance.

Cliff Young showed up to that ultramarathon wearing overalls, work boots, and goulashes, but he didn't really run the entire race outfitted that way. He changed into a pair of shorts and running shoes.

What changes do you need to make to your spiritual wardrobe?

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul told those believers the things they needed to put away; i.e., those things they needed to take off. He wrote, “But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices” (3:8-9).

What kind of practices, what kind of habits weigh you down and keep you from moving freely?

Some athletes practice with ankle weights or a weight vest, but they don’t play the game or run the race with those. They take them off; they lay them aside when it is time to run and time to compete.

Paul moved on to those things the believers needed to put on, those things with which they needed to dress themselves. He wrote, “Put on, then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, . . . [forgiveness] And above all these, put on love, which binds everything in perfect harmony” (3:12-14).

Before I went to Falls Creek this summer, I bought a swim suit. I can describe those swim shorts with two words: loud and baggy. That seems to be the style. Baggy swim shorts are for people like me who don’t really swim.

When you watch the Summer Olympics, you will never see a swimmer wearing baggy swim shorts. In fact, all the Olympic athletes compete in clothes that fit close to the skin without being restrictive. Whether they are swimmers, cyclists, gymnasts, or track and field athletes, they are not going to wear baggy, loose fitting clothes. Since their events will be won or lost by a fraction of a second, they want to reduce any unnecessary wind resistance. Many athletes will even shave all the hair on their arms, legs, and head to maximize their performances by minimizing or eliminating all hindrances.

As Christians, our goal is not to run our race faster, but we do want to increase our endurance. To that end, we want to divest ourselves of all unnecessary weight. For that reason, anything that is displeasing to God must go. What actions and attitudes do you need to get rid of, that you need to remove?

This week my wife cleaned out the refrigerators in the church kitchen. She told me she was going to be merciless. She was. The weight that was left in the trash can was so heavy the youth didn’t even want to take it the dumpster after the Wednesday evening meal.

To run with endurance, we must get ready.

Get Going

Look at the last portion of v. 1. The author implores, “Let us run . . .”

- It is not enough to talk about running the Christian race.
- It is not enough to study the race before us.
- It is not enough to listen to the testimony of those who have run and run well the Christian race.

All of those are good things, but don’t let those things keep you from actually running. “Let us run **with** endurance” the author wrote. In other words, “Let’s get going, and let’s

keep going.”

When I was a junior in college, my roommate and best friend was a young man named Rodney. Rodney was several years older than me. He had been in the army before starting college. He had been a cook in the army. The army had sent him to cooking school. When he got out, he worked as a cook in a couple of restaurants in OKC.

We lived off-campus in an apartment. It was great having a roommate who could cook. Initially, he made it his mission to teach me to cook, but he gave up telling me one day, “Matt, you aren’t meant to be a bachelor.”

I actually met Rodney before he went to college. He was a member of the same church I went to in OKC. He had been away from the Lord for a long time. Oddly, what got him turned around was a movie he watched. It came out in 1981 and went on to win four Academy Awards, one of which was “Best Picture.” The movie was *Chariots of Fire*. It tells the story of Eric Liddell. He was a Scotsman who competed for Great Britain in the 1924 Olympics. My friend was impressed by the strength of Eric Liddell’s faith. He was a Christian, and it was his conviction that he ought not compete in races on the Christian Sabbath. Because of that conviction, he did not run in a race that he was favored to win because it had been scheduled for Sunday. That made an impression on my friend.

The movie also tells of something that happened before the 1924 Olympics. Liddell ran in a race between England, Ireland, and Scotland. It was the 440, and Liddell got off to a bad start. His feet got tangled with an English runner, and Liddell fell to the track. An official shouted to him, “Get up and run!” By the time Liddell got on his feet under him and began running again, he was 20 yards behind the pack. Many runners would have walked off the track admitting defeat, not Liddell. He began running. Little by little, he began gaining ground. With 40 yards to go, he managed to make it into 3rd, and then into 2nd place, and just as he made it to the finish line, Liddell stuck out his chest and edged out the man who had been in first place. He won the 440 after having fallen to the track earlier in the race.

The next day a newspaper reported, “The circumstances in which Liddell won the race made it a performance bordering on the miraculous. Veterans in the history of athletics were unanimous in the opinion that Liddell’s win in the quarter mile was the greatest track performance they had ever seen.”

We need to keep in mind that the most important thing is not how you begin but how you end.

I once heard a preacher say about salvation, “What matters most is not how high you jump but how straight you run when you hit the ground.”

There are going to be times when we trip, times we stumble. We may even fall on our face. We must not let that failure define us. We need to get up and get going again.

My friend Rodney got up and got going again when he was in his early to mid-20’s. He’s been running with endurance ever since then. A movie got him turned around, but the Spirit of God has kept him running.

What about you? Where are you today? Are you sitting on the side of the track? Are you about to pack it in and give up? Get up! Get going! The race isn’t over. Stay the course!

If we are to run with endurance, we must get ready. We must get going.

Get Focused

Look at vv. 2-3. Our text tells us to look to Jesus and to consider Him. The NIV translates the beginning of v. 1 in this way: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” It is not enough to glance at Jesus. We are to focus on Him.

One of our most serious mistakes is that we keep our eyes on ourselves. We pay far too much attention to what we are doing and how we look to others.

The most popular photograph in America is the selfie. I once worked with a young lady who, numerous times a day, would take a picture of herself. There is something wrong with that kind of self-focus.

If you are constantly looking around at others or if you are forever looking at yourself, you are looking in the wrong direction. Fix your eyes, train your focus on Jesus.

Where can we see Jesus? You can see Him primarily in the pages of this Book. If you are going to fix your eyes on Jesus, you must read the Bible. He is found in the NT, but He is also found in the OT. Read this book looking for Jesus.

The late Rush Limbaugh had a younger brother, David. David is still living. Back in 2015 he published a book entitled, *The Emmaus Code: Finding Jesus in the Old Testament*. Whether you are in the NT or OT, look for Jesus.

Not only look for Him, but also consider Him. Consider why He did what He did. What was His motivation? What was His goal? What is He teaching us by what He did?

Let’s look more closely at v. 3 because it tells us something in particular that Jesus did. He endured hostility from sinners against Himself.

How do you react when people mistreat you? How do you react when people speak ill of you or treat you unjustly? Do you become defensive and try to justify yourself? Or do you go on the offensive and try to get back at those who are persecuting you? Do you try to teach them a lesson?

The author of Hebrews is telling us, “Don’t react. Instead reflect. Think about Jesus and what He did. He didn’t try to defend Himself. And he didn’t strike back. Instead, He said, “Father, forgive them because they have no clue what they are doing.”

It is exhausting trying to defend yourself. It is exhausting trying to get back at those who have hurt you or wrongly accused you? Don’t waste your energy on either of those two reactions.

If you will look at Jesus, consider Him, and do what He did, you will be able to persevere and keep going to the end.

Let me take you back to October 20, 1968. The summer Olympics were being held in Mexico City. At 7:00 PM, about an hour after a runner from Ethiopia was the first to cross the finish line in the marathon event, and just as spectators were about to leave the stadium, people heard police sirens and whistles indicating that another runner was entering the stadium. All eyes turned and saw a runner wearing the colors of Tanzania come limping into the stadium. His name was John Steven Aquari. His leg was bandaged and bloody. He had taken a bad fall during the race. He limped his way around the track and was the last athlete to complete the marathon. The crowd stood and applauded wildly.

When it was over, he was asked, “Why didn’t you quit? You are badly injured. Why

didn't you give up?"

Aquari answered, "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start this race. My country sent me to finish."

Likewise, God did not send Jesus to the cross so that you could start the race of the Christian life. He saved you by sending His Son so that you would finish the race.

Don't give up. Don't give in. Don't give out. Keep running. Keep moving forward. Keep moving upward.