

Run With Perseverance

Hebrews 12:1c
Rev. Brian Bill
February 15-16, 2014

Note: Some of the ideas for this sermon come from *Mainstay Ministry* and are used by permission.

Even before competing, American bobsledder Johnny Quinn and the Sochi Olympics have not gotten along very well. He got off to a rocky start when he got stuck alone in the bathroom and couldn't get out. He persevered by pulverizing the door and then crawled out the hole he made. **[Show pic]** He tweeted this statement: "*With no phone to call for help, I used my bobsled push training to break out.*" The picture of this damaged door has gone viral. On Monday of this week, Quinn was trapped again – this time in an elevator. At least he had some company and didn't have to smash the door to smithereens!

We're in week 3 of our series called, "Go for the Gold: Becoming a Spiritual Champion." Today we're going to learn how to push through so that we can run with perseverance the race set before us.

In our first message we meandered through the hall of faith in [Hebrews 11](#) in order to *remember the witnesses*. These men and women of faith serve as encouragers and examples to us today. We've put their names up on the walls to remind us that their faith should propel us to trust God. There are so many witnesses who've gone before us that it's like a huge cloud that envelops us.

Have you noticed how sparse the crowd of spectators has been at the Olympics? **[Show pic]** I'm glad that God's grandstand is filled with faithful followers who have finished their race. Since they lived by faith, so can we.

Last week we learned that we must *remove hindrances* if we're going to get the gold. *We must give up in order to go up.* Did you hear the story this week about the possible reason why the U.S. speed skaters had their worst performance in three decades? They're wondering now if it's due to a small vent in their new hi-tech suits creating drag and thus slowing the whole team down. They've been working hard at covering this vent and have even requested that they be allowed to wear their old suits.

"Hindrances" and "signature sins" must be decisively dealt with in our lives because they create drag in our discipleship. We then wrote down on paper some of our stuff that encumbers and the sin that entangles us, and then we crumpled them up together. The sound of the paper crumpling has stayed with me all week.

We must *remember* who is around us, we must *remove* what is on us, and we're challenged next to *run with perseverance* by relying on what is in us.

Please turn in your Bibles to [Hebrews 12:1](#) as we focus on the final words of this verse: "***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.***"

Believers in the first century had tasted persecution and were tired of it and others had become passive in their faith because everything had just become routine. Some wanted to bail and others were just blah. Here's a key principle: *the depth of our devotion ultimately determines our impact*. Just as Olympic athletes need determination to compete, so too, we will not just stumble into becoming spiritual champions. It takes discipline and determination and drive...and perseverance.

There are three key training rules in this passage that we must put into practice if we hope to get a medal (outline adapted from Steven Dow, www.sermoncentral.com).

1. Get in the game. The one imperative, or command, in Hebrews 12:1 is to run. The verb tense indicates that we are to “*keep on running*” and the word itself means to move forward with haste. This same word is used in Mark 5:6 where we read of the man in bondage who, “***ran and fell on his knees in front of Jesus.***” In Psalm 119:32, David declared, “***I run in the path of your commands; for you have set my heart free.***”

The Christian life is compared to a race that must be run. This seems pretty elementary but one must be in a race in order to win it – it's hard to compete when you're locked in a room. You won't win just because your wife is saved and serving. You won't get holy just because your husband is. You won't medal just because your mom is growing spiritually. You won't develop as a disciple just because your dad is devoted to Christ. Or, just because your child is sold out to Jesus, doesn't mean that you're good to go.

Spiritual growth does not happen spontaneously. In fact, our growth in Christ *is intentional, not automatic*. Friend, are you on the spiritual sidelines right now? Are you just watching what goes on? It's time to get in the game.

I read a fascinating article in the *Chicago Tribune* many years ago about a book, which translated from French into English means, “*Hello Laziness.*” The author encourages French workers to adopt a strategy of “active disengagement,” or calculated loafing. The book became an immediate bestseller (though I wonder if people were too lazy to read it).

Related to this, a new study came out last that discovered a new trend called “cyberloafing” that is making its way into the workplace. According to Newswise, the average worker spends 60 to 80 percent of his or her Internet time at the office engaging in tasks that have nothing to do with their jobs.

Are you loafing around instead of loving God with everything you have? Would someone refer to you as a spiritual slacker? Are you a pew potato? What are you doing with the time you have left?

2. Keep on going. We are in a race of service and also of suffering. That leads to the second training rule: we're to run “***with endurance,***” which literally means, “*to abide under*” something. It has the idea of “cheerful endurance” and is translated “patience” in some versions.

The Bible is filled with references to those who hung in there, of those who kept on going when the going got tough. Here are six perseverance principles:

- ❑ **Look above and beyond circumstances.** If we turn back one chapter to Hebrews 11:27, we learn that Moses *“endured as seeing Him who is invisible.”*
- ❑ **Focus on the reward.** If we go back one more chapter to Hebrews 10:36, we learn that there’s a prize for perseverance: *“For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.”*
- ❑ **Good things come to those who wait.** Flip back a few more pages to Hebrews 6:15: *“And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.”*
- ❑ **The path to maturity runs through perseverance.** James 1:4: *“Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*
- ❑ **Rely on God’s help to hang in there.** 2 Thessalonians 3:5: *“May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.”*
- ❑ **Jesus applauds endurance.** Revelation 2:2: *“I know your works, your labor, your patience...”*

Connie DeVilbiss is one of Edgewood’s missionaries. She’s 86 years old and is still serving Christ in Mexico City. Her husband Harold died recently. This is what she said in her most recent prayer letter: *“I’m going to continue doing what an 86 year old woman can do for her Creator. I will be involved in discipling, witnessing, encouraging and mentoring other Christians, just as I have always done, working in the churches my husband started...please pray that God will continue to use me for His glory and that I will be able to adjust to my new life now without my soul mate. God is still good all the time.”*

Some of us have been knocked off stride by stuff that we never saw coming. One of the best examples of perseverance from the Sochi Olympics took place when Shiva Keshavan, a 31-year-old luge athlete participating in his fifth Olympic games, fell off his sled going 80 miles an hour. Somehow he remained calm and regained control, got back on his sled and finished the race.

[Show pic]

I suspect that some of you have been bounced off your sled as well. Perhaps you’ve been nursing a grudge against God or you’re harboring resentment toward an individual or you’re just plain mad about a situation that has happened. Friend, you have a choice. You can remove yourself from the race or you can get back in and keep on going. Later in Hebrews 12:12, the believers are urged to strengthen their *“hands which hang down, and the feeble knees”* instead of giving up. Remember the witnesses that are cheering you on. Remove any hindrances. And run with perseverance.

By 7:00 p.m. on October 20, 1968, at the Mexico City Olympics, it was starting to get dark. The final marathon runners were cooling off. One hour later, as the last few thousand spectators were preparing to leave, they heard sirens coming from the gate entering the stadium. As the crowd turned, they saw a sole figure, wearing the colors of Tanzania, limping into the stadium. His name was John Steven Aquari.

His leg was bandaged and bloody. The crowd stood and applauded. With each step he gained strength from the cheers. His limp became a walk, his walk became a jog, and finally his jog became a run. As he neared the finish line, even though he came in dead last, the cheering made it seem like he was finishing first.

A reporter asked him the obvious question, “*You are badly injured. Why didn’t you quit? Why didn’t you give up?*” Aquari, with quiet dignity replied, “*My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. My country sent me to finish*” (Craig Brian Larson, “Strong to the Finish,” Preaching Today, Tape No. 155).

Friend, perhaps you’ve been hurt or you’re hurting right now. Don’t give up. Hang in there. Pray through the pain. Finish the race set before you. Listen to these encouraging words from 2 Chronicles 15:7: “***But you, be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded.***”

Get in the game. Keep on Going. There’s one more training rule.

3. Stay on track. Let’s look at the final phrase of Hebrews 12:1: “***...the race that is set before us.***” Interestingly, the word for race in Greek is *agon*, from which we get the word “agony.” The race is not meant to be easy.

Guys, it’s supposed to be agonizing to watch Olympic ice dancing! One of my friends posted this on Facebook: “*That short moment of panic when ice dancing comes on the Olympics and you can’t find the remote to change the channel!*” By the way, have you watched any of the curling competition? I don’t understand that sport at all but the Norwegians won the gold and their uniforms should have won a medal as well. This is probably the only time you’ll see a guy with a broom in his hand for that long!

The word “race” is translated “fight” in 2 Timothy 4:7: “***I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.***” Notice that this race is “***set before us***” which means we don’t get to choose it. God has determined the race; our job is to run it and to stay on track. There are two aspects of the race, or God’s will for our lives.

- **God’s Universal Will.** God has marked out some parts that are for everybody. We’re to live out the Great Commandment and fulfill the Great Commission. Incidentally, in a message Jim Cymbala preached at Moody’s Founder’s Week, he made the point that only 7-9% of Americans are truly born again. We have some work to do, don’t we?

We’re to keep the fire burning by practicing the presence of God and by living out the spiritual disciplines. Did you know that the average Olympian trains more than 7,000 hours for an event that may last less than 60 seconds? Just as athletes discipline themselves to achieve a goal; according to 1 Timothy 4:7 we are to “***train ourselves to be godly.***” Here are some disciplines that *Discipleship Journal* profiled in an article called “Soul Building” (Issue 143, Pages 55-65).

- ✓ **Abstinence** (from natural appetites)

- ✓ **Simplicity** (taming the desire for possessions)
- ✓ **Stillness** (being alone and silent in God's presence)
- ✓ **Meditation** (thinking carefully about Scripture)
- ✓ **Prayer** (conversing with God)
- ✓ **Reticence** (controlling the tongue by listening)
- ✓ **Stability** (staying put)
- ✓ **Worship** (focusing on who God is)

Nothing valuable ever comes without cost. As someone has said, *"There aren't any hard-and-fast rules for getting ahead...just hard ones."* Another person put it this way, *"You don't have to lie awake at night to succeed...just stay awake during the day."*

Too many of us are like the little girl who fell out of bed one night. When she began to cry, her mother rushed in and said, *"Honey, how come you fell out of bed?"* To which she replied, *"I think I stayed too close to the place where I got in!"*

Have you not moved much from where you were when you first got in the Christian life? If we are not practicing self-discipline and growing in the spiritual disciplines, God may bring "suffering discipline" into our lives and we may fall out of the bed and onto our head! God doesn't do this to punish but to restore. It's not retributive; it's meant to be redemptive. He loves us way too much to let us go astray. He wants to get us back on track, and as C.S. Lewis has said, pain is often His megaphone to get our attention.

Notice Hebrews 12:11: *"Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."* Rather than being angry with God when he delivers discipline, we should be grateful because this is His way of correcting harmful patterns so we start running the race again.

- **God's Unique Will.** The other way to stay on track is to run the unique race marked out just for you. One translation renders Hebrews 12:1 this way: *"...Let us run with patience the particular race that God has set before us."* Just as there are unique hindrance hurdles and signature sins that are trying to slow you down and trip you up, so too, you have a unique calling.

One time Jesus told Peter some pretty personal things that had to do with his future ministry and even how he would die. Peter seemed more interested in what Jesus had in mind for his buddy John when he asked in John 21:21: *"Lord, what about him?"* Jesus' rebuke is instructive for us: *"If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."* In other words, Jesus had a path for Peter and a job for John and He has a unique assignment for each one of us. Have you ever noticed that sometimes our dissatisfaction with life is directly proportional to our desire to run someone else's race? It's the "greener grass" thing. Here's a good corrective to keep in mind: *The grass isn't greener on the other side of the fence. It's greenest where you spend time watering it.*

Friend, your race is uniquely yours to run. God has a plan and a purpose for your life that only you can fulfill. And He wants to use you according to your SHAPE (spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality and experiences). One pastor puts it like this, *“You’re not meant to run someone else’s race, and they’re not supposed to run yours. If you don’t run the race that God intended for you, it won’t get run!”*

It’s time to get in the game and to keep on going and to stay on track. Can I encourage you to take the next step in becoming a spiritual champion? It’s going to involve some sacrifice and some discipline. If you don’t you’ll eventually start drifting and disconnect from others. *And if you unplug you will eventually unravel.*

Check out a passage that appears earlier in the Book of Hebrews in 10:25: ***“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”***

While God has a task for you, you are not designed to go it alone. We’re made for community. Notice the use of “us” and “we” in Hebrews 12:1 - ***“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.”***

When Canadian freestyle skier Alex Bilodeau took home the second gold of his career on Monday night, he celebrated by embracing his brother Frederic, who has cerebral palsy. Alex gripped his brother tightly as they jumped up and down and then he dedicated his medal to Frederic, who has served as his inspiration throughout his career. *“[Frederic said] the same thing he said to me in Turino and Vancouver: ‘He loves me.’ That’s the first thing he tells me...He lives his dreams through my eyes and for me it’s priceless to see that, to see his eyes just so big and so proud...He’s encouraged me. He’s always been with me through these four years, working hard. He’s a big part of that.”*

Your race is designed for you individually but you’re not designed to go it alone. Do you have a training buddy? No one can do everything but everyone can do something.

Putting into Practice

I’m going to list a number of action steps. What one or two things will you commit to do this week?

1. Say yes to a ministry opportunity. Someone has said, *“There are a lot of Christians who are doing nothing. But there are no Christians who have nothing to do.”*
2. Find a spiritual mentor.
3. Get to know a spiritual hero from Hebrews 11.
4. Come up with one word to summarize your aim this year. That’s what the Ignite Singles ministry is doing. They’ve chosen words like *love, energy* and *devotion*. What’s your one word? My word is *intentionality*.
5. Begin practicing the spiritual disciplines.
6. Rid your life of some stuff that is encumbering you.

7. Ask God daily for victory over a sin that has been entangling you.
8. Make a relationship right.
9. Reach out to someone in need.
10. Initiate a spiritual conversation with everyone you talk to.
11. Master a book of the Bible.
12. Bow before Christ as your Lord and Savior and receive the free gift of salvation.
13. Decide to be baptized.
14. Join this church.

This past Sunday Beth and I, along with a few others from Edgewood, went down to Calvary International Revival Church as they held their first service in their newly renovated building. As we sat in the back and watched our African brothers and sisters give praise and glory to God for what He has done, my mind went back to the summer I taught at a Bible college in Zimbabwe in 1983. That made me smile.

But then I started crying when I realized what these refugees have endured and yet they are still running the race with perseverance. Some of them saw family members murdered in the genocide in Rwanda. Others feel like they don't have a country because they grew up in refugee camps.

But their past hasn't stopped them from praising in the present! Their worship was jubilant. Their praise unbridled. When asked how many had been meeting to pray that God would solve the problem of their building being condemned, almost every hand went up. Pastor Vitalis stood with his arms high and yelled out, "Alleluia!" The people echoed this praise. By the way, another one of their choirs will be here next weekend to help us praise together as one church!

Friends, if they can persevere through their problems, then why can't we? Let's...

- Get in the game
- Keep on going
- Stay on track

Invitation: "The Stand"

*So what could I say?
And what could I do?
But offer this heart oh God
Completely to you!*