

Running and Prayer

Teammates for the Road of Life



J. L. WOOD

Running and Prayer: Teammates for the Road of Life

ISBN 979-8-218-94108-6

Copyright © 2025 by J. L. Wood

Marathon Publishing
Doylestown, Pennsylvania

Cover Image courtesy of NHP&Co
Book and Cover Design by Paraclete Design

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America

For more information, please visit www.runningandprayer.com.

For my wonderful family.

Contents

Start.....	7
Change	11
Easy.....	15
Trust.....	21
Structure.....	25
Visualization	33
Now.....	39
Fuel	43
Timing.....	47
Rest	49
Difficulty.....	51
Others.....	55

Start

Running through the four seasons is beautiful. In the fall, the air is cool and crisp, the leaves blaze with brilliant colors, and a smoky, earthy scent often lingers in the breeze. An easy run along a river trail or around a lake at this time of year is exhilarating. Running through a snowfall in the winter is peaceful—you can see your breath while all around is white, silent, and still. You feel alive running in the cold. In spring, when the trees and flowers return to life and the sweet smell of wet earth fills the air, running in just a long-sleeve tee and shorts is like breaking out of a cocoon. Warm summer evening runs are relaxing amid the sounds of crickets and the glow of fireflies.

For many runners, running is an experience of freedom. We are outside, moving, and away from distractions and the demands of daily life. Our minds can roam free as we roam along streets and trails. We reconnect with the beauty of the natural world and come back in tune with our own bodies. Running rejuvenates us and helps us

find our rhythm again—with ourselves and with the world around us.

Running also brings us back to basics. When we run, the superficial drops away. Whether you are out for a run by yourself or standing in the starting corral before a race with hundreds or thousands of other runners, it doesn't matter what your job title is, how you look, what others say about you, or what you own. Running helps us step away from what is commonly known as the “false self,” which defines us by these externals and gives us space to connect with our true self—who we really are apart from all our roles and the things we surround ourselves with.

In this way, running sets the stage for prayer. The initial stages of prayer involve purposefully stepping away from the superficial to connect with the reality of who we are—as created and loved by God. When we are more in touch with our true self, we become more open to the reality of God's presence and action in our lives. As that openness grows, we begin to experience God's warmth, compassion, and love. This, in turn, makes us more receptive to God's presence in others, allowing us to form deeper and more meaningful connections and relationships and, eventually, to see God's presence everywhere.

This approach to prayer is primarily about openness to God and a desire to cooperate with God's action in our lives. It is not asking for anything, trying to make events go our way, bargaining for outcomes, meeting obligations, judging or being judged, or imposing our will. Instead, it simply seeks closeness to God and trusts that this closeness will change our lives. This way of prayer is not based on a reward-and-punishment system, as though more prayer could somehow earn more of God's love (it doesn't). Nor does it require fulfilling requirements or reciting formulas. It does not seek control but rather seeks to participate. It

is an experience of freedom—like the freedom of running, but far more real.

At its heart, this approach to prayer seeks to grow in connectedness to God, who is all loving, all accepting, all supporting, all light, *all*. Gradually growing in this connection brings true freedom, true confidence, inner strength, and true joy at the deepest level. It is this connectedness that allows us to move through both the good and the hard times of life with a greater sense of inner peace. It is this connection with God that grounds us. This is what God freely offers to all, and prayer is one of the primary ways we can grow into this closeness to God.

For me, running and praying go hand in hand. They work together, and they build on each other. Talking about prayer in terms of running makes prayer more understandable. Spirituality can be hard to grasp in the abstract, but it becomes clearer when we connect it with something human and concrete—like the experience of running.

Distance running has been a tremendous part of my life. I started running in high school on the cross-country and track teams. I ran my first marathon in college, raced 5Ks and 10Ks through my twenties and early thirties, coached high school for a short time, ran with various clubs, and ran on the corporate track circuit for a company where I worked. I took a break during the years we were raising our children, but as soon as they were on their own, I returned to daily runs and began training again—now for easy-paced marathons. I have never been an outstanding runner, but I love running and it has enriched my life in so many ways.

Parallel to running, I have also pursued spiritual growth throughout my life in one form or another. I was fortunate to have been raised in a family where prayer and spiritual growth were valued and taught. It took root in

me, and I have continued on this path. I was also fortunate to grow up with a balanced emphasis on hard work, common sense, responsibility, the pursuit of excellence, respect for others, and service to others—all integrated with spirituality.

Physical development through running and spiritual development through prayer are both tremendously exciting processes. They lead to health, fulfillment, inner joy, and a deeper experience of life. Though they require effort and commitment—and are difficult at times—they remain journeys of exploration, discovery, and growth. Both cultivate an appreciation for the wonder of being alive and living life to the fullest.

Change

Running changes you. Physically, consistent distance running over time transforms your body. Your leg muscles grow leaner and stronger. Your tendons and hamstrings strengthen. Your heart gets stronger, and your entire cardiovascular system becomes more efficient. Your resting heart rate decreases. Your lung capacity expands. The capillaries near your leg muscles grow and multiply to supply more oxygen-rich blood to those muscles. Your bones become denser and harder. Your body burns fat more efficiently, and your weight levels out where it belongs. Even at the cellular level, the mitochondria multiply and enlarge to absorb more oxygen.

These physical changes happen slowly, almost imperceptibly, over time. They may not be noticeable to others, but they are profound for the runner. You simply feel better. You don't have to be an elite or exceptionally gifted runner for these changes to take place. You just have to run.

These bodily changes trigger other physical benefits.

You sleep more soundly when you are tired from running, and you naturally sleep longer to be rested for the next day's run. You're motivated to eat healthier foods to feel good and fuel your runs. You begin to avoid unhealthy foods and excess sugar and alcohol. Over time, you become more in tune with your body and want to take better care of it.

These physical changes begin to overlap with changes in our minds and emotions. The mental focus required for consistent distance running sharpens our minds and helps us see life events more clearly. The strenuous effort and physical fatigue of running foster calmer, more even emotions, placing problems in better perspective and allowing for greater peace. Long training runs and slow progress cultivate patience, while the challenges of distance running are humbling and help us grow in humility.

Running also affects our daily time management. You need to carve out time for runs amid commitments to family, work, friends, community, and the many other demands of life. Running helps us make the best use of our time.

The physical challenges of distance running stretch us, push our limits, and test our mettle. They reveal what we are made of in ways other pursuits cannot. These challenges encourage us to expand what we think we can do and give us the courage to go for it. Running is a catalyst, shaking us out of our comfort zones and inviting us to live more expansively on all levels, beyond training runs and races. Running increases our zest for life and instills in us the desire to participate as fully as possible in the exciting adventure of being human.

Living the life of a distance runner also fosters a greater degree of self-respect. You gain respect for yourself for the discipline and dedication required to be a runner, and you begin to hold yourself in higher esteem. We are

often told how important it is to believe in ourselves—being a distance runner gives us a concrete reason to do so.

When you let running become a part of your life, you don't just go for a run every so often—you *become a runner*. You live the lifestyle of a runner. It is this consistency—running over months and years—that makes these changes possible. After any single run, you may not notice any difference, but over time, these changes inevitably happen. In fact, they are guaranteed.

And everyone can become a runner. You don't have to be fast. You don't have to look like a runner. You don't have to be young. Anyone can lace up a pair of shoes and take that first short walk-trot to begin on the path toward becoming a runner.

In a similar and complementary way, prayer changes us. But unlike running, its changes are not as visible because they are not physical. Yet they are just as real—and far more profound. While running primarily transforms our bodies, prayer transforms the core of who we are.

At its heart, prayer is the conscious and deliberate act of opening ourselves to God and to God's influence and action in our lives. This can take many forms and can be as individual as each of us. The more we open ourselves to God, the more we change. We grow in empathy and compassion—the most basic qualities of God—as we draw closer to God. We become more forgiving, because God forgives all of everything. Prayer moves us to generosity toward others and ourselves, reflecting God's nature of overflowing abundance. Prayer fosters patience, allowing us to meet both ourselves and others with greater acceptance. And prayer enable us to develop a higher degree of internal strength, based on trust in both God's presence and action in our lives and in ourselves and the gifts we have been given.

Prayer also helps us live more calmly—not because it gives us everything we want or makes life convenient (it doesn’t), but because it allows us to see that God is constantly working with us for our good, that God has a plan for our lives, that even difficulties hold value and purpose, and that everything does not depend solely on us. Prayer inevitably makes us more kind, as we experience God’s kindness and extend it to others.

Prayer reshapes our perspective, helping us see what matters most, which is how willing we are to cooperate with God’s work in our lives and how freely we share ourselves with others. Ultimately, prayer leads us to become more human, more whole, and more loving.

Like distance running, prayer brings about these changes only over time and when it becomes a consistent part of our lives. This means setting aside time daily for prayer, just as we commit time daily to running. Just as the physical changes from running come only with dedication and consistency, the profound changes of prayer come when you make it a conscious, committed way of life—when you become a *person of prayer*.