

If you have ever run in a race, especially a long distance one, you know that at about the halfway point your body and your mind start sending you strange and sometimes painful signals. Thus, there's a tendency to give up and just go sit on the sidelines and watch the other runners go by. And in a way, life is like that. But Jesus Christ calls us to keep going, and with His help we can. As you read the letters of the Apostle Paul, you discover that he was a great fan of the ancient games, and that Paul and many of the other New Testament writers used running as a teaching illustration. So, let's see what the writer of the letter of Hebrews has to say this morning about running the race of life. I will be reading from the 12th chapter of Hebrews, the first three verses.

Read Hebrews 12:1-3

One of my favorite movies is *Forrest Gump*. This spring, my son Ben and I were responsible for the overall maintenance of the Eastdale Little League Baseball Park. One of my duties was to cut the grass on the major league field. So, twice a week, I spend about an hour cutting the grass. As I ride around the field on the 360 circle John Deere mower, I often remember the scene from the movie where Forrest was cutting the grass, and would say to myself: "I'm Forrest Gump! I'm Forrest Gump!"

Now one of the scenes at the beginning of the movie sets the stage for the rest of the story. As a young boy, Forrest had to wear leg braces to straighten out his back. The local town bullies were constantly picking on him and his friend Jenny. One day as they were walking home from school, the bullies came riding up behind them on bicycles, and Jenny yelled out: "Run, Forrest, run!" As he hobbled along in his braces trying to escape the bullies, all of a sudden, a dramatic scene occurred. His leg braces began to pop off and he built up speed as Jenny shouted more words of encouragement in the background. As a result, Forrest was off and running for the rest of his life. Maybe this picture from this movie classic will help us better understand these wonderful words from Hebrews.

Ask any person what he or she remembers about the letter to the Hebrews and their first response will most likely be – "Chapter 11, the Faith Chapter." Chapter 11 provides us with an impressive overview of biblical faith and an extensive list of the faithful servants of the Lord, from those who passed through the Red Sea all the way to the martyrs of the early church. The writer of Hebrews referred to many individuals in biblical history who had "run with perseverance the race set that had been before them."

The first word of the 12th chapter takes us back to the previous chapter. The writer begins with the word "Therefore." The previous chapter had highlighted the Bible Hall of Fame of Faith. Now that the history has been given, the writer reminds us that we are "surrounded by so great

a cloud of witnesses.” We have a cheering section of saints who have gone on before us and prepared the way. In the relay race of faith, they have passed the baton on to us. Our faith is built on the foundation that they have laid. They challenge us today to be faithful as we run the race of faith laid out before us as they have done. We must always remember and take assurance in the fact that we are not alone in this race as we seek to walk each day with Jesus Christ.

At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, the cheering section of the great cloud of witnesses made all the difference in finishing the race. As the gun sounded for the 400 meters race, Derek Redmond of Great Britain had great hopes of winning the gold medal. But as he entered the backstretch, Redmond fell to the track with a torn hamstring. By an act of sheer will, he struggled to his feet and began hopping toward the finish line in pain.

Suddenly Derek’s father jumped out of the stands and ran past a security guard. He threw his arms around his son. In a voice choked with emotion, he whispered: “Come on, son, let’s finish this race together.” The crowd cheered and wept as they watched the father half-carrying his wounded son down the stretch and across the finish line.

Our cheering section may be heroes of the Bible or the Christian Church, or it may be made up of family, friends, and church members who have helped shape our faith. If you think about it, you can almost see their faces and hear their voices. They cheer for us and surround us. Is not the church to be a place where a “great crowd of witnesses” gather to cheer and encourage one another on in their journey of faith? The Apostle Paul exhorts us in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to encourage one another and to build each other up. Are you a part of a faith community that can encourage you in your spiritual journey? Does this community of believers help you along in your race? Do you cheer for others as they attempt to walk in faith each day? We run best when someone is cheering for us, and also running alongside us.

Perhaps you are one of those who are looking forward to watching the summer Olympics in Paris this year. The Olympics, as I understand it, are about 2500 years old, dating back to around the 5th Century B.C. The writer of the book of Hebrews was, no doubt, very familiar with the Olympics, and perhaps that is why he uses the metaphor that he does for running the life of faith. In Hebrews 12:1-2, he speaks of laying aside every weight and every sin that clings so closely that it distracts us, so that we may run with perseverance the race of faith that is set before us. Olympic runners often train by strapping weights around their wrists and ankles to help them build up strength and endurance. But in the real race, they throw off these excess weights so they may run the best that they can.

This removing of weights is something that the military never heard of in my day. When I was at ROTC camp at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in 1968, we sometimes ran with full packs and

rifles, and always with combat boots on. You never realize how heavy those boots are until you have run a mile in them on a hot, humid July day in North Carolina.

Spiritually speaking, there are weights – excess baggage – that hinder us from running our race of faith. There is the “sin that so easily entangles” as our text states. Entangle is defined as “to snarl; to complicate; to confuse.” The weight itself is not always sin. It is whatever adds to the difficulty of our spiritual progress. Also, the weights are not necessarily external; they are, first of all, in the heart. The moment a thing that is not of God’s purpose for a Christian finds a place in our heart and mind, it becomes a weight, no matter what it is. And the result – lack of spiritual growth and peace with God – is soon obvious.

As the author of Hebrews puts it, this might include any number of unhealthy desires or addictions. These are things that control our lives at the expense of our relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In many ways, they are like the braces that Forrest Gump wore, hindering us from running the race of faith. There is that bad habit that threatens to damage our physical or emotional health, relationships, or good reputation. There is that personal characteristic, such as uncontrolled temper or gossiping tongue, that holds us back from spiritual growth and maturity. We may be struggling with the baggage of guilt from past failures; or the baggage of bitterness, anger, or ill feelings towards another person who hurt us in the past; or the baggage of regret over a foolish mistake or a broken relationship.

Certainly, this sin that entangles us is like trying to walk in shackles or braces like Forrest Gump, which prevents us from running our best, and at times even walking. Through repentance and confession, we can lay aside this grip of sin on our life, and by God’s freely given grace, we are set free to run and enjoy the abundant life that Christ has promised to those who would follow Him. Remember what Jesus promised us in Matthew 11:28 – “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” In other words, come to me and I will remove the weight that holds you down and the shackles that hold you back, and I will set you free to really live life as if it was intended from the beginning.

There is the story of two men who were backpacking and camping in the Alaska wilderness. Because of where they were, the men had to carry everything that they needed to survive on their backs: their food and cooking utensils, tent and sleeping bags, water, and extra clothing, and so on. One day as they were walking down a wilderness path, they heard the cry of a nearby grizzly bear. Both men stopped dead in their tracks. One of the men very slowly began to ease the heavy backpack off his shoulders, preparing to run. The other man looked at him somewhat bewildered and said: “Surely, you don’t think you can outrun that bear, do you?” “No,” replied the first man, “I only have to outrun you.” All we have to do to survive the race of faith is to outrun the devil, and Jesus will help us get rid of the extra, unnecessary weight that slows us down.

Charles Spurgeon, a great British preacher from the past, tells the story of crossing a certain mountain range. The mule laden with their luggage sank in the snow, and could not be moved until the load was taken off his back. Then, and only then could the mule scramble out of the hole it had made and continue on the journey. And unfortunately, we as Christians are often in danger of being weighed down by our earthly possessions, worries and demands. But with the Lord's help, we can unload and cast off this excess baggage and journey through life without sinking in the mud created by ourselves and the world.

It also reminds me of going through an airport. Instead of checking your baggage, you decide to carry it on. So, after you get your ticket, you head for the security checkpoint and the gate. But if you have my luck, your gate is always at the far end of the terminal. As you hurry through the hallways dragging your suitcase, which is getting heavier with each step, you begin to wonder "why didn't I check my baggage?" You keep asking to yourself: "Why did I bring all this stuff; do I need everything in this suitcase; it's really heavy; why am I carrying this excess baggage?"

Perhaps this is precisely the question that some of us should be asking ourselves this morning, spiritually speaking: "why am I carrying all this excess spiritual or emotional baggage? Why do I allow myself to struggle with all these emotional weights and sinful habits that drain the joy out my life?" In reply to this, the author of Hebrews instructs us to look to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," who like an athletic coach, stands ready to encourage us, cheer us on, and help us get rid of the unnecessary weight and baggage that slows us down.

As Christians we are in this race of faith for the long run. The Christian life is pictured as a long-distance race rather than a short sprint. Unfortunately, some Hebrew Christians were tempted to drop out of the contest when the going got tough. But God wants us to stay in it for the long haul. Our race of faith is to be "run with perseverance." Many people get off to a dramatic beginning in their Christian experience, and then fade into the distance because of the lack of perseverance, will-power, and reliance on Christ to see them through the uphill stretches of the race. The important question is not how exciting was your beginning as a follower of Jesus Christ, but how faithful you are in your journey through life? Remember, by perseverance, the snail reached Noah's Ark.

In the army I ran the mile in several races at the ROTC camp that I mentioned earlier. Now I was not and am not a track athlete, but it was fun to observe people and the different approaches that they took to the mile run. Some would lay back in the back of the pack and hope to catch up at the end. This usually didn't work. Then there were the rabbits or those who thought that they were the fastest thing on the face of the earth. At the start of the race, they would take off like their pants were on fire. But guess what – they would give out about three-quarters of the way. The smart runners would lay back at the front of the pack and stay close to the rabbits and then at about three quarters of the race, they would start picking up

the pace and finally on the last lap turn it on. Likewise running the race of life faithfully requires perseverance, pacing yourself, and using the mind that God has given you. But above all, keeping your eyes fixed on the finish line, looking to Jesus Christ.

Well, we're not Forrest Gump with leg braces, and we're definitely not at the Olympics today, but we are all still running a race – the race of life. Each of us are at different points in our journey, but every one of us here I hope are on the straight and narrow path that Jesus Christ calls us to run. Of course, we realize that it is not always going to be easy, we will struggle in many different ways. But the Good News is that Jesus is always with us all the way and wants to help us get rid of some of the excess baggage that we are carrying or dragging along behind us. Examine your life and see what is holding you back from truly experiencing God's love and the abundant life that His Son promises to all who follow Him. Like Forrest Gump, let us throw off those unnecessary weights and shackles so that we can joyously run the race of life set before us. What's weighing you down and preventing you from truly experiencing Jesus Christ in your life today? Give it to the Lord, and then run Christian run. Amen