

Running a Hard Race and Learning the Hard Way

Hebrews 12:1-13

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Our televisions will be filled this week with images of athletes demonstrating incredible endurance. When we get to chapter 12 of Hebrews we also find images of athletes as models of endurance. The life of faith in Christ is compared to a race—and I think it's not a sprint but a marathon. Maybe I'm thinking that because the beginning of the Olympics happens to coincide with my 60th birthday, and most of the wisdom that comes to a Christian on his 60th birthday has to do with the awareness that this is a long distance race. But I think the author of Hebrews has that in mind because in the first three verses of chapter 12 he uses the word "endure" three times. His message here is the message of his whole sermon: "Don't give up. Hang in there. Don't give up on Jesus."

I've never been much of a runner. I had asthma as a kid, and I was introduced to running by a Phys. Ed. teacher when I was a fat boy in the sixth grade in Texas. Coaches in Texas are not exactly wired for compassion. This one liked to make us run laps around the playground, which was enough to get me huffing and puffing and wheezing, and I was always bringing up the rear. It was humiliating to be first in the classroom and last on the playground. Even when the fat and the asthma melted away, I never got over my first taste of running. I've never much liked pain or losing. It took me a while to figure out that following Jesus involves both.

The runners we'll see in the Olympics are pretty amazing. Even the sprinters have endured long periods of training. The long distance runners are completely beyond my comprehension. You know, even in the first century when a preacher talked about a big crowd of witnesses and a race laid out before us, many of his hearers would have thought about the ancient Olympics or something similar. They might have pictured those runners in ancient Athens, or they might have thought of the races in contemporary Rome, where the first recipients of this letter probably lived. The Greek culture and the Roman culture which followed it were almost as obsessed with the visible form of the human body and athletic competition as ours is. They were the ones who built huge stadiums—especially the Romans—not for religious purposes or state purposes, but for sports. The preacher in Hebrews says, thinking about all the heroes of the faith he listed in chapter 11, "Since we are surrounded (in the stands) by such a huge crowd of witnesses (both in the sense that they are witnessing our athletic event and in the sense that they themselves have borne witness to God in the face of opposition)"—since we are living our lives in this Olympic stadium surrounded by great runners but finding ourselves on the track, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

I've only been to the Olympics once, and it was when I was in the seventh grade. In 1964 the Olympics came to the newly rebuilt Tokyo, my home town. The entire American School took a field trip one day to witness the track and field events in the stadium seating 70,000 people. I'd never been in such a large crowd before. All day long people were running. Even though I hated doing it myself, I could see the beauty of it and admire it. One of the most memorable races was watching Peter Snell of New Zealand take the 800 meter race—following up on the gold medal he'd won in Rome in 1960. The following Sunday at Tokyo Baptist Church, who should be introduced but Peter Snell? After church, I made my way to him to get his autograph. He signed it "Peter Snell, Galatians 2:20" the verse that says "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." He also gave me a little gold "NZ" lapel pin. Snell told people that they should keep their eyes fixed on Jesus. In the

race in Rome, the man in first place ahead of him failed to keep his eyes on the finish line. He turned around and looked over his right shoulder to see where his competition was, and when he did, Peter Snell passed him on the left.

Even more memorable than seeing Peter Snell win was seeing the conclusion of the marathon. The guy who'd won in Rome was an Ethiopian named Abebe Bikila. I loved that name. Abebe was the son of a shepherd from a village way out in the country. He just made the Ethiopian team at the last minute as a replacement. When he got to Rome, he tried on the shoes provided by Adidas, and they didn't fit. He decided to run barefoot, the way he had trained running on the hillsides of Ethiopia. He ran barefoot on the cobblestones of the Appian Way and became the first sub-Saharan African to win a gold medal.

In Tokyo, Abebe Bikila wasn't really expected to compete. Forty days before the Olympics he had collapsed in Ethiopia and been taken to the hospital; they found he had appendicitis and had to operate. He couldn't recover from surgery in time to run a marathon. But when I sat there in the stands with 70,000 people waiting for the finish of the marathon, there came Abebe Bikila all by himself, barefoot, eight seconds ahead of the next person. Everyone rose to cheer as he took his second gold. Bikila didn't even seem tired; he started doing a series of stretching exercises. He told reporters that he could have run another 10 kilometers.

Those are the images that come to mind when I hear the words of Hebrews about the Christian life as a race that requires endurance. For this early preacher, faith is not just a decision. Faith is running a race. Faith *is* endurance. Faith means faithfulness, believing over the long haul as shown in our lives, not just making a profession. Neither is faith, for these believers, a call to die. They are not having to face the penalty of death for their faith; they have not had to shed blood. But they are facing hostility. That is what they have to endure—not physical pain, but the hostility of their neighbors. “Which is worse?” I could ask some of you today, and I bet you would rather have a broken leg than be attacked in the Block Island Times.

But, the preacher of Hebrews says, in the face of hostility such as Jesus endured from sinners, do not grow weary or lose heart. Instead, lay aside anything that might hold you back from running the race. Get rid of distractions. Get rid of temptations. Get rid of things that might trip you up and keep you from being obedient to Jesus and doing the right thing. Above all, look away from all that distracting stuff; the Greek phrase literally says “look away to Jesus.” Did you notice that he doesn't say to look to Christ in his glory? He says to look to the historical Jesus, the one who was like us, tested in all the ways we are tested, the one who understands our weakness. Look to the one who endured the cross. It's revealing that even the cross is spoken of in terms of *endurance*. If you saw the movie *The Passion of the Christ* and saw the picture of what Jesus went through in going to the cross, you can see that it was a test of endurance. At this point the author of Hebrews is not interested in what Jesus did for us on the cross—he's dealt with that in earlier chapters. At this point he wants us to think of the cross as a model of endurance in the face of hostility.

A crucifixion as a form of capital punishment was not only about pain but about shame. It was the most shaming form of death there was. You just hung there naked before all your neighbors, hanging often for several days dying as you dehydrated and asphyxiated, taunted by rowdies and picked at by birds. The point was to leave you totally exposed and helpless. But the preacher says that Jesus disregarded the shame. He thought of shame as something of no great consequence. He endured the cross and endured the shame, and therefore God has rewarded him with a seat at his own right hand.

The call to follow Jesus is a call to take his shame upon yourself. “To the old rugged cross I will ever be true, its shame and reproach gladly bear.” Don't pretend to be a follower of Jesus if what you really want is to be liked and accepted by other people. If you don't want any controversy or opposition

in your life, stay away from Jesus. But if you find Jesus compelling, if you see in Jesus the one who opened the way to God, if you understand him to be God become one of us in our weakness in order to make us like himself, then by all means keep your eyes fixed on him and expect hostility to be part of the deal.

I've heard repeated this week several times that cliché, "No good deed goes unpunished." It's not God that punishes but the crowd. That's why a life devoted to justice and peace requires being able to receive *un*just accusations and conflict instead of peace. The very thing we stand for is the opposite of what we receive from the world. That is the nature of the Christian life, as it was for Jesus, and that is why we are called to endurance. That's why Hebrews—like Revelation—says that faith *is* endurance the end. Faith is a long distance race to be run. We don't celebrate when a runner pops out of the blocks but when he finishes. The Christian life is not just about making a decision and being baptized but about a faith that endures until the end of the race.

Beginning in verse 5, Hebrews changes the image from a race to the discipline a parent imposes on a child. I think it's easy to misunderstand this, to hear it as saying that every bad thing we go through—like being shot in a movie theater—is a punishment from God. That's not what this is about. In the quotation from Proverbs, the text probably does have in mind the idea of discipline as punishment. But it is being quoted from the Greek, and as he does in many ways the author of Hebrews reflects Greek culture.

The word he uses that is translated here as "discipline" is *paidia*, one of the most important concepts of Greek culture, from the same root as "pediatrics" and "pedagogy." Basically *paidia* means education or training. So the preacher in Hebrews is telling the church that the things they are going through are not punishment but a part of their education in Jesus-ness, part of their spiritual formation as Christians. Verse 7 says in the NRSV "Endure trials for the sake of discipline," but I think a more literal translation would be "Endure *as* discipline" or "Endure *for paidia*, for education." We said before that faith *is* endurance; now we say that endurance is education. Eugene Peterson catches this sense in his translation of these verses in *The Message*: "God is educating you; that is why you must never drop out. He's treating you as dear children. The trouble you're in isn't punishment, it's *training*, the normal experience of children." Even Jesus was trained like this. Hebrews 5:8 says, "Although he was a Son, he *learned obedience* through what he suffered." To me, that is one of the most surprising things this author says—that Jesus learned obedience through suffering. That shows us his basic understanding of the Christian life. We too are being educated through the tough stuff we go through—in particular shaming and hostility from those who oppose us.

If we allowed our earthly parents to teach us, as limited as they were, should we not allow our heavenly parent, the eternal God, to teach us as he knows best? Verse 10 point to the goal of our training: "God trains us for our own good, that we might share in his holiness." It's so that we might become like him, holy, holy, holy. We cannot have his character without the experience of enduring suffering and opposition, because (I would think) those are at the heart of the experience of being God, even as love is. The cross is not just a moment in God's long existence; the cross is also a picture of God's relation to the human race. When Paul says that we can't share Jesus' life if we don't share Jesus' death, this is what he means: enduring shame and suffering for the sake of the truth about reality that Jesus taught. In Romans 5, Paul makes a similar point to Hebrews when he says "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character" (5:3-4). The author of Hebrews is honest about this: "Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time." Training for a race is no fun. Workouts are hard. To cite a cliché: no pain, no gain. But if we want to finish the race we have to endure things that are unpleasant in order to reach the goal.

Therefore, he says, never give up! Quoting Isaiah he says, “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.” Good words for the day after the church fair! Don’t let fatigue stop you from finishing the race. Don’t let mean people stop you from running the course laid out for you. Pursue peace and holiness.

Let us not grow weary and lose heart, but let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. At the Mexico City Olympics in October 1968, the stadium was beginning to darken by 7:00 p.m. The winner of the marathon had crossed the finish line over an hour earlier. Spectators were starting to leave. But then they heard police sirens at the gate of the stadium. One lone figure came through the gate. His name was John Steven Aquari, from Tanzania, the last man to finish the marathon. He had taken a bad fall early in the race and his leg was bandaged and bloody. It was all he could do to limp his way around the track. The crowd stood and applauded as he completed that last lap. When he crossed the finish line, someone dared to ask him, “You are badly injured. Why didn’t you quit? Why didn’t you give up?” Aquari said with quiet dignity, “My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. My country sent me to finish.” The Lord did not call you to start the race of the Christian life. He called you to finish.