

So Run - Keep your eyes on the prize - Running the race

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[0:00] 1 Corinthians 9.24. Paul writes, 1 Corinthians 9.24. 1 Corinthians 10.24.

1 Corinthians 9.24.

1 Corinthians 9.24-27. Keep your eyes on the prize. So run that you may obtain the prize. Now Christian life is a race, isn't it?

It's a fight, it's a battle, it's a marathon. But ahead there lies a prize, a crown, a victory to be won. Will you run? So run. So as to be a winner. Will you win the prize? The prize ahead. Are you even in the race yet?

[1:27] It's a big question, isn't it? Today let's look at how to be a winner in life. How can we be such a first class gold medal champion in life?

How can we be our best in what really counts? How can we reach that highest potential as it were? And we see some things that are true in the fitness world, that are true also in the spiritual world. In the spiritual fitness, as it were. Verse 25, we see self-control. Self-control. Verse 25. It's going to take self-control.

Strive for mastery. Self-discipline. And we could think of many stories of worldly athletes and sports stars. One of those is Gary Player.

He was one of the most successful international golfers of all time. Not that I know who he is, but he was famous as the world reckoned. And he'd lost count of how many times that someone had said to him, I'd give anything to hit a golf ball like you.

[2:30] After one particularly gruelling day on the links, the player couldn't resist correcting the person. He said, I'd give anything to hit a golf ball like you. And he said, no you wouldn't.

You'd give anything to hit a golf ball like me if it were easy. And the player then listed the things one would have to do. In order to achieve his level of play, you've got to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning, go out and hit 1,000 golf balls.

Walk up to the clubhouse to put a bandage on your hand where it's bleeding, then go and hit another 1,000 golf balls. That's what it takes to hit a golf ball like me. And we think of that spiritually speaking.

Paul trained for his daily spiritual journey like a world-class athlete. He was dogged and determined. And he self-controlled. He was temperate.

He strove for the mastery, that self-discipline. He wanted to have the self-discipline, the self-control to finish that race well. And likewise for you, for me, brother, sister, as an effective Christian, we want to identify those habits that we'll need to build our spiritual life.

[3:40] Habits like that spiritual fitness that we need. Finding that balance between work and home. Being responsible in our work and home life.

And sometimes there's things to give up. You know, there was an old preacher called Sam Jones. And he had a revival tent kind of meetings back in the US.

And he had what he called quitting meetings. Quitting meetings. And he was preaching to Christians. Urging them to give up the sinful practices in their lives. And Sam's message was very effective.

Many people promised to quit swearing, drinking, smoking, lying, gossiping, or anything else that was displeasing to the Lord, that the Lord moved on them to give up.

And one day Jones asked a woman. She came forward at this meeting. And she was quite moved. And she came forward at this quitting meeting. And he asked her, just what is it that you are quitting?

[4:40] And she replied, I'm guilty of not doing anything. And I'm going to quit doing that too. She wanted to stop. She wanted to quit not doing anything.

She wanted to quit that too. It's a good thing to quit, isn't it? Even though she had no bad habits to give up, she wasn't actively living to please God.

She said, I'm going to give that up. It's a good thing to give up, isn't it? Self-discipline. Self-discipline. Strap on your shoes and get going.

Discipline yourself to run your earthly race with strength and purpose. One of the fruits of the Spirit is temperance or self-control. Self-control. It means keeping your cool, keeping your composure, not being a hothead.

Self-control will transform your character. It will help you bring your whole life under the Holy Spirit's control. I'm still working on it, aren't you?

[5:39] I'm still working on that. Self-control. The toughest person in my life is the one that looks me in the mirror every morning.

I have the most trouble with that person. Don't you? Be persistent. Be persistent. It's going to take faith. Self-control. Verse 2. It's going to take self-control.

It's going to take faith. Praise the Lord. Self-control. And stamina. Stamina is another one.

Worldly athletes, the sports stars, they develop stamina. They just keep on keeping on, don't they? Nothing kind of... Well, they have that...

They might stumble and struggle, but then they get the second breath, don't they? And they keep on going down the track. That's stamina. So run that you may obtain eyes on the prize.

[6:39] Eyes on the prize. Life is a training ground. It's a place of training. Sometimes you don't know what it will throw at you next. And like that worldly training, so is the spiritual life.

There's a stamina. We need to develop that grit, that determination, that exertion. Again, that scripture.

Wherefore seeing him... Sorry. Wherefore seeing also we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside, lay aside every weight.

We don't want anything to hold us down. Lay aside the weight and the sin which so, so easily beset us and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, despised the shame. Sorry, getting that wrong again.

[7:42] Who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. It says, run the race with patience. Stamina.

Stamina. The long haul. Christian life is not some short distance sprint. It's a marathon, isn't it? And it tells us of running the race with patience.

There's perseverance here. There's a long intent of application of energy and intent, that aiming for the long haul, that long distance event.

And the word race, agon, is where we get the word agony, isn't it? And it signifies a race where every aching desire in our body says, I'm over it.

Just, I can't do any more. You get that agony. But we've got to break through that pain barrier. If you ever run distance, you know what I mean.

[8:46] Now, I know as a youngster, I used to like the cross-country races, downhill and up Dale and around the corner, and over this and that obstacle. And it's like, that's the Christian life, isn't it?

It's a bit like that. And it's not a sitting down, a walk, a crawl, a jog, a lying down. Every one of us has our own specific course mapped out for us, like an obstacle course.

And for each one of us, it's unique. We've all got different obstacles and challenges. And for some, the road is relatively straight. Some have a windy or an uphill ride all along, but some seem longer.

You've got your race to run. And we all must run with perseverance. This word patience, it tells of it being sticky. It's a stick-to-itiveness.

There's a sense of sticking to it. It's that determination. When your body is resisting the race, you've got to beat your body and get it into submission and steadily go on, refusing to be deflected.

[10:02] It's calling for faithful plotters. One foot ahead of another. I was talking with some people about the English language classes, and you learn bit by bit, don't you?

I've still got lots to learn. You know, the English language dictionary, there's so many words I don't know in that dictionary. You learn bit by bit, word by word, and a bit by bit becomes a lot, doesn't it? And it's like that with the Christian life. One foot after the other. We learn more and more. We grow more and more. Faithfully plotting.

Fast or slow, strong or weak, we keep on keeping on. And there's many bumps and bruises.

There's disappointments. There's challenges along the way. But brother, sister, stamina.

Persevere. Always trusting. Never giving up. Keep on keeping on. Keep on loving each other. Keep on serving others. Keep on praying. Keep on wanting more of God.

[11:03] Keep on witnessing to your family. Don't let up. Don't stop. Keep faithful in church. Keep on serving. Keep on giving. Keep on reading the word.

Run the race with patience, with perseverance, with courage, with endurance. Keep running. And brother, sister, dig deep.

Ask God to supply that strength you need, that help of endurance. And sometimes, as people running this race, we might stumble and fall, have a few grazes and bruises, wounding and hurting. Don't let that put you off. It's like, you know, that story I read earlier. of a man becoming bitter and hurt over some injury, some words said.

Of course, we need to be careful what we say. Very mindful of that. I can say things well-meaning, well-intentioned,! But said wrongly.

[12:07] Said unthinkingly. And we can all say, wow, I should take that back. We don't want to cause bitterness or hurt. But likewise, let's not hang on to it.

If we're the injured party, oh, you've seen my chip on my shoulder? Oh, have you seen it? I just want to show it off to everybody. That chip on the shoulder, let it go.

Don't hang on to that hurt. Let it be. Get rid of it. Life's too short, isn't it? Some people, they hang on to the chips on the shoulder.

They get chip after chip after chip. Don't be like that. It's a weight that we should cast off, isn't it? Every weight of sin.

Reduce it. In the race, we don't hang on to things that will slow us down. If it's slowing you down, it's not of God. Let go of it. Our goal is Jesus.

[13:09] Our eyes are fastened onto him, the author and finisher of our faith. He is the one who is the focus. Christians will let us down. Pastors will let us down. churches will let us down.

But we're looking unto Jesus. We're not looking to that. We're not looking to men or women who can say unwise things or hurt us. We're looking unto Jesus. He's the focus.

Here's the foundation of our faith. That's what we're looking for. That's what we're looking at. That's all that matters. And we're aiming for that. Eyes on the prize.

Eyes on the prize. And let's not settle for second best. Let's aspire to that excellence. As Paul writes in Philippians 2, he says, Wherefore, my beloved, as you've always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Work out your salvation. Now you see some big strong blokes like me, you know, down at the gym.

[14:26] See, I've been working out quite a bit lately. And you see, they work out, don't they? They work out their own physical prowess and their physique and their abs and show off all their muscles like I do.

That's because it's taken work to develop such a physique as this. It's taken that work. And likewise, what about spiritually speaking, brother, sister?

Are we working it out? Are we working out our salvation? Not working for it, but the salvation's working out in us. It's happening. It's making us stronger.

And just as a physical workout makes you physically stronger, we need to get some spiritual workouts, don't we? It's like Paul, he was, in effect, he was saying, go into the gym as a sense that we work out that salvation.

We put some work into it and the results will show. And so there's a sense where God is working in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

[15:40] So number one, stamina. Sorry, rather, yeah, the first one, self-control, stamina. And the third point is the sure reward.

Seeing the self-control, the stamina, and we see another truth here is the sure reward. There's a finishing line. eyes on the prize.

Paul understood this importance of discipline and the picture in 1 Corinthians 9 is like a marathon race like an Olympic event. And in those days back in Paul's time, the winners wore crowns made out of leaves, a laurel wreath, leaves knitted together into a crown.

And such a crown would wilt within a few hours. It was corruptible. It would corrupt. It would wilt and fade and fail. And Paul compares how some people live for the glory and praises of this world which are short-lived.

What a tragic thing it would be that we would invest in our energy and our fervour in things that will just fade away.

[17:03] And they'll just be like leaves that go brittle and dry and crumble and disappear like dust. But the Christian's prize will not fade away.

It will not wear out. It is forever. It is incorruptible. Incorruptible. And 2 Timothy 4 verse 8 Paul writes of this this laurel wreath, this crown.

He says, Henceforth there is laid for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge shall give me at that day and not to me only but unto all them also that love is appearing.

And see, it probably wasn't. I'd have to check what that word crown is but we know that the crown that our Lord gives us is not a corruptible one. It's not like a laurel wreath.

It is an everlasting crown. It says it's a crown of righteousness. And the fact is brothers and sisters we're getting closer and closer to that finishing line every day.

[18:04] We're closer today than we were yesterday. And just as I saw that accident well I heard it. And I thought wow that was so close.

As the man smashed into the gum tree I thought wow life is so short. Whether he was a careless driver and just sort of a rev head spinning around that corner thinking he was a big smart cool guy with his flashy car and ended up being a wreck on the gum tree.

And life is so short isn't it? A slippery road a careless moment a distraction some indecision or some other careless driver and who knows the finishing line could be closer than we think it is.

But the fact is brothers and sisters there's a great reward ahead. Nothing compares in this world to the value of this crown of righteousness which the Lord is preparing for all who love him.

no honour or glory that this world can give compares. And when you think of the Olympic champions the people who can do amazing feats with the human body some have spent their entire lifetime learning that sport that skill they've spent their entire childhood childhood I saw some video footage of some little kid who must have been about that high and he's doing amazing things just his parents trained him in some physical skills that are just mind blowing and some spend their entire childhood their whole lives giving such devotion for what might be one single event that is over in just a few minutes and it's gone isn't it?

[19:57] All of that training that sacrifice that application of energy all for that one single goal a gold medal that can hang around the neck maybe worldwide recognition being the best in humanity and a particular thing but it's really dross isn't it?

It's nothing and what matters is that everlasting crown life is a marathon and it's a marathon in a marathon it's not how you start it's how you finish that matters most and let's all be reminded of the brevity of life and of the values that really count it's an endurance run we're all called to this together and it's not like it's competitive such we're trying to beat one another we're working together we're helping one another and when we see someone flagging on that racetrack we lend a hand we lift them up we stir them spur them on we encourage we come alongside there's a man who entered a 10,000 metre road race in Nebraska and 10 years early he had an aneurysm in his brain that left

him paralysed on his left side and on that misty morning of July 1981 he stood with 1,200 live looking men and women at the starting line the gun cracked bang and the crowd surges forward and Bill throws his stiff left leg forward pivots on his right foot and hits the ground a plop plop plop rhythm it seems to mock him as the pack fades into the distance and sweat rolls down his face and pain pierces his ankle but he keeps going 6 miles and 2 hours and 29 minutes later Bill reaches the finishing line and a man approaches him from a small group of bystanders and it's a famous marathon runner and he says as he puts the medal around the runner's neck he says you've worked harder for this than I have really the man who persevered was a winner too because he got to the finishing line sometimes that can be like that for us can't it as Christians we think well I'm really not in the lead pack I'm sort of just lagging behind and I've got so many faults and failings and I'm just barely scraping through as a Christian it's getting to that finishing line it's the eyes on the prize isn't it it's the eyes on the prize don't put yourself such that you downrate yourself but just keep on eyes on the prize just keep pressing on to that finishing line looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of your faith we've seen self-control we've seen stamina we've seen the sure reward and but let's just backtrack a bit here another fact about a race is the starting line we've been talking about how the

Christian life is a race we've talked about the finishing line the sure reward it's important to be sure you are on the race track because not everyone is on this race we've got to go back to the starting line how does it start it starts when we receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our saviour it's when we this race starts when you trust him when you call on him when you cry out Lord save me I trust in you that's the starting line now the great saints of faith in Hebrews 11 show for us the life of faith and it says there's a great cloud of witnesses watching on maybe in the wings you know we could almost conceive it as such that there's many barracking for us in the angelic realms as it were those who have gone before us our loved ones who have trusted him who have stood up for Christ who have lived the life of faith and Hebrews 12 shows us as we run that race of our lives we're looking unto Jesus running with our heads up and our eyes focused on him to run the race of life the life of faith we see that there's many distractions that will take our attention from him we must not let go of fixing our eyes on him and it says the

Lord Jesus has run the race ahead of us he made himself nothing he became a servant he became a man and he experienced death not just any death but the death of the cross and we're told let this mind be in you our Lord Jesus showed us how to run this race and he leads us to victory question is how can we end well ultimately the finish line is out there in eternity in heaven and we'll all cross that line one day we've been talking about Hebrews 12 look back to Hebrews 11 talks of the men and women of the faith and we could say as someone has kind of pointed out that the Bible also has as well as the hall of fame as it were the Hebrews 11 there's also a hall of shame men and women who ought to be in Hebrews 11 as well they ought to be in

[25:39] Hebrews 11 but they're conspicuous by their absence and at the final judgment some Christians will will have shame at the throne think of for example the first king of Israel Saul he should be in Hebrews 11 but he is not he focused more on pleasing the people and on pleasing God what about the wisest man who ever lived Solomon he should be there in Hebrews 11 but he is not he focused more on foreign women and their gods Balaam he was a good prophet but he had his eyes on the money and his eyes were so out of focus and distracted that he could not see an angel in front of his face and his donkey was more focused on God than he was how easily we can be distracted and miss out on God's best for us or maybe we just get so close and then we kind of let discouragement or our tiredness overtake us and we stop now there was a woman called

Florence Chadwick who wanted to break a swimming record swimming from Catalina Isle to California 26 miles of swimming the water was cold sharks had to be fought out a couple of times there was a dense fog and finally she gave up they pulled her in this was a 26 mile stretch she'd gone 25 and a half miles but she couldn't see the shore because of the fog if only she knew she could have hung in there just that little bit longer we're told to run the race with patience with endurance with perseverance how can we run with endurance there's a great cloud of witnesses we can get inspiration from them there's a great cloud of witnesses we can read about them in here we can get some good missionary biographies and the stories of revivalists and reformers the church

history that shows us the Fox's

Book of Martyrs people that have gone to such a degree of faith that should inspire us those great cloud of witnesses we can have faith like Abel like Noah like Enoch like Abraham like Moses like Joshua a cloud of witnesses and they're cheering you on eyes on the prize eyes on the prize fix your eyes on Jesus he's the one he's set the race before us that agon that struggle that contest and he set his eyes on the joy but he had to go through the cross and he's laid out this race for you sometimes it's going to be hard sometimes it's going to be a struggle I don't mean to overstate such stories of worldly athletes but bear with me with another one

Tanzanian Olympic runner he came in last he was bandaged from he was bleeding from a bandaged knee from an earlier fall and almost everyone had gone it was getting dark and the stadium was virtually closing down and when asked why he kept running he said my country did not send me 7000 miles to start the race they sent me 7000 miles to finish the race he was determined to finish the race what about you brother sister when your strength flags when you're feeling it's hard yakka the Christian life I'm the only Christian in my workplace it seems maybe the 7000 they haven't bowed the need to bail there's people out there you don't even know are a Christian that you work with but nevertheless it can feel like you're all alone it can feel like it's hard going even making a meeting it's hard to get time that's the reality for all of us eyes on the price eyes on the price reduce the weights that slow you down you can be a lean mean running machine as it were spiritually to get rid of everything that hinders you what's holding you back the weight that so easily besets us you know that chip it's just so heavy just what's holding you back what's hindering you maybe we need a quitting meeting like that woman

I'm doing nothing but I'm going to quit doing that too maybe there's things you can do that you think wow what's stopping me what's holding me back eyes on the prize throw off the weights what's snagging you what's holding you back as a Christian and I'm talking to me too I'm just as faulty as the next man what will make you more heavenly minded eyes on the prize how can we get in the training how can we get into some training here I'll get you doing some star jumps in a minute no it means praying without ceasing it means hiding the word of God in your heart it means meditating on it day and night day and night it means taking up your cross daily putting to death the deeds of your body yielding your body as instruments of righteousness presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice putting on the whole armour of

[32:10] God resisting the devil submitting to God taking every thought captive to obey him don't be hindered don't be entangled remember Florence Chadwick the swimmer a couple of months later she tried again and she made it she got back in the water in that cold water with the sharks and with the storm and she got through the fog and made it and it's like that for you and me sometimes as a Christian you might think I've blown it God's given up on me you know we can all feel that time of desperation I'm just not with so and so eyes on the prize run the race run the race that is set before you don't stop don't wonder keep your eyes on the prize looking unto

Jesus he's the author and finisher of your faith and he's gone through everything that we have to face and more he endured the cross because of the joy set before him and that joy that was set before him was you it was you he saw the salvation of sinners for the son of man has come to seek and to save that which was lost he saw you and I being saved from the fires of hell let's pray Lord we thank you that you guide us on life's running track Lord we help we need your help desperately Lord that we cannot be distracted Lord help us to if we've fallen on that track we've bruised and battered to dust ourselves off Lord help us to recognise where there's things we're carrying that we should have let go long ago help us

Lord to have our eyes focused on you to know you as the author and the finisher the one who begins our faith and sees it through to that final finishing line Lord the author and finisher of our faith and we thank you Lord for your great grace that we can even be on this running race help us Lord to realise the struggle at times that it is to know that that great energy that you empower us with that self control that stamina Lord to see that that great prize that lies ahead not that we're working for our salvation but that our salvation is working for us Lord that and we can strengthen our faith we pray if there's any here this morning that they're flagging it's hurting it's hard it's heavy lift us up Lord in Jesus name Amen