Run the Race (PM)

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Preacher: Willie Shain-Ross

[0:00] Well, good evening again everyone. You know, you all were so cheerful when I say good evening, there's just silence. Let's try that again. Good evening everyone. Good evening.

Thank you. Well, for those of you who don't know me, by the way, my name is Willie Shane Ross, and I'm a minister here on staff at St. John's. And so as I mentioned in our Kids Talk, we're looking at this great passage from Hebrews as part of a new family series.
And the family series is covering Pilgrim's Progress, but what we're doing is we're looking at Hebrews 11 and 12 and looking at the heroes of faith who've walked the faith and give us examples of how to do it.
And Hebrews is a book written to Christians experiencing persecution and feeling pressured to abandon their faith. And so as you read the book, you'll see that the author is constantly encouraging his audience and calling them to endurance.
And in this passage this evening, he's calling us to not give up. He's saying he's calling us to keep going and to run the race with perseverance.
[1:04] And so in order to do that, we're going to look at what the passage shows us about three things. So there's three things. I'm going to look at our situation, our exhortation, and our motivation.

Our situation, our exhortation, and our motivation. But before I jump into the text, would you please join me in a word of prayer? Heavenly Father, we thank you for the message you have given us this morning.
We live in a world full of distractions and discouragements. And so, Father, we pray that you would give us strength this morning to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and rest assured that he is the full revelation of God's will and word.
Send your spirits and penetrate and revive our hearts this morning. Give us ears to hear and eyes to see. Give us grace to know your will and to run the race with perseverance.
And I pray this all in your son's name. Amen. So my first point, our situation. A few years ago, I signed up for my first ever full-length marathon.
[2:13] And as I signed up, I knew I wanted to do it well. I wanted to run strong and sprint across that finish line. So I had a goal in mind. I created a six-month training schedule with every single day of the week for the six months planned out.

I researched and bought the lightest and most efficient shoes, shirts, and shorts. And I devoted many, many weekends to longer and tougher runs.
It took time and energy and endurance. I was excited to run that race. However, it was also the year 2020.
And when COVID hit, the organizers sent us an email canceling the marathon. But they said, good news. You can still run those 42 kilometers. You can track your results online and then go online and compare with others.
Well, that didn't sound like particularly good news to me. So with no finish line, I was out. With no end goal, the running just felt pointless, joyless, and exhausting.
[3:26] I needed a finish line. I needed a goal set before me. And the same is true of our lives. Without a clear destination, life can feel long, directionless, and often very difficult.

Yet our passage that we just read this evening, the author of Hebrews reminds us that life does indeed have a destination. We are not people who run aimlessly.
We're not in an endless rat race. We're running towards someone. We're running towards Jesus Christ. And that is the life of faith. And so that's our situation.
We're in a long and difficult race. This isn't a 50-yard sprint. It's a marathon. And the original audience of this letter certainly would have felt the difficulty of following Jesus.

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These were early Christians who were persecuted, ostracized from society, and held in contempt by their peers. Probably why the letter is so strangely relevant for us today, because it's becoming increasingly difficult for us to be Christian as well.
[4:35] There's increasing social pressure to denounce Christianity as immoral or old-fashioned. And at the same time, we're surrounded by so many pleasures and distractions that are vying for our attention.

And so with societal pressure pushing us and so much pressure and distraction pooling at us, is it any wonder that only 1 in 10 children from mainline Protestant churches stay Christian into adulthood?
It's 4 in 10 in evangelicals. It's difficult to continue as a Christian. It is a tough race. But for any of you who've done a marathon or who have done any kind of races, even though it's hard work, you also know that it is so rewarding.
Our lives of faith have direction, purpose, and joy. But in order to run this race well, in order to experience that direction, that purpose, and joy, we need perseverance. And so to follow Jesus means we have to be discerning, we have to be disciplined, and we have to be devoted to Jesus Christ.
And so that really brings me to my second point here, which is our exhortation. Or, how do we run this race? I would say if you have your Bibles in front of you, but we don't have them in the pews.
[5:51] But in chapter 12, verse 2, our author gives us three exhortations. First, he tells us to throw off every weight that hinders. And by using the word weight, our author is referring to things that are not necessarily sins, but they keep us from running the race well.

If you get into long-distance running, you'll start drilling down on training plans, dietary habits, and the lightest gear, because suddenly you realize that every little thing that slows you down will cost you in the long run.
And not only will it cost you, but every weight that you have will make the race that much more difficult. You can race in hiking boots if you want. But if you did that for 42K, they're going to give you blisters, and you're not going to get the time you want.
You're going to slow down. And so in the same way, when we start following Jesus Christ, we need to start drilling down on our habits that hinder us. And these are not necessarily evil or morally wrong habits, but they slow us down by taking our attention away from Christ, away from the finish line.
You know, from a personal standpoint, I'll give a personal example. I absolutely love being entertained. Love being entertained. And as we live in this kind of consumer society, I know I'm not alone in that.
[7:05] Staying up to watch season four of Stranger Things is way easier than rising early to pray. And there's nothing inherently wrong with TV or with relaxing.

But when I'm not careful, my priorities move away from Christ. They drift away. And instead of seeking him, instead of seeking holiness, I seek my own personal entertainment. I constantly have to catch myself and ask, why am I doing this?
So throwing off weights, then, requires rigorous discernment. It requires us to hold our hearts to Scripture and to pray to God for revelation and insight about who we are and what our hearts desire.
Our writer then gives another exhortation. He tells us to throw off sin that so easily entangles. And the imagery here gives us the impression of a runner who has a rope tied around her ankles and trips up before even getting started, which is what we had marked to.
And a weight may hinder us, but you can't even run the race if you're falling every time you try to step forward. If you notice, Mark wasn't running the race. He was grabbing onto Josiah and letting him carry him. Sin cuts us off from the race.
[8:20] It stops us from being able to put one foot in front of the other. And yet, we're so prone to trivializing or dismissing sin in our lives. We either try to justify our actions and don't want to admit our guilt, or we care more about what the people around us think and don't want to be labeled something derogatory.

But if we trivialize sin, if we say that it's not important, then the gospel of salvation has no meaning. And if the gospel means nothing, then we're not running the race. So friends, let me land on a quick application here.

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If there is a persistent sin in your life, there is something that's holding you back and it feels like rope around your ankles, I encourage you to do what it takes to untie those knots or to cut those cords.
Take it to Jesus in prayer. Seek help from your fellow runners. You know, we have staff here at St. John's. We have a prayer team. You can come to one of us. Or you can seek out a godly friend and somebody who will remind you of why you run the race.
Because the thing is, we all have ropes around us. We all sin and we all will trip. But we also all have access to Christ's grace. Ooh, that felt kind of charismatic.
[9:35] Thank you, Jeremy. Feel free, the rest of you, to take notes and do likewise. This brings me to the third exhortation that our author gives. So our author here, he's telling us to be discerning with our hearts, to be disciplined against sin.

And third, he wants us to be devoted to Christ. In verse two, he calls his audience to fix their eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And Jesus is the pioneer of our faith because he is the one who has blazed the trail for us.
He has taken on the sin and judgment of the world for us. And he is the one, then, who has opened up the way to salvation by going up on that cross. So apart from him and his work, there is and can be no salvation.
We can have faith because of what he has done. And he doesn't just show us the path of faith. He perfects ours.
One of the most striking things about the book of Hebrews, and if I can commend it to you, go home and read Hebrews and go and circle every time the author mentions Jesus. And you'll be amazed at how encouraging our author is.
[10:40] Because our author, what he does is he focuses on Jesus' humanity. The author reminds us over and over again that Jesus, the Son of God, became human so that he could taste death.

God became human so that he could experience suffering. He became human so that he could know our temptation. Chapter 2, verse 18, our author says, and listen, because Jesus himself suffered when he was tempted, listen, he is able to help those who are being tempted.
Jesus doesn't just show us the way of faith and say, good, I've done it. Now you go do it. Good luck. When we trip and fall, Jesus comes alongside us.
Let me illustrate quickly. In 2016, Johnny Brownlee was leading the last kilometer of the World Triathlon Series. And in that last kilometer, he suddenly collapsed because of exhaustion.
The runner behind him, however, came up and rather than passing by and seeking the first place, took Johnny on his shoulder and carried him to the finish line.
[11:50] The second runner sacrificed his opportunity for glory to help his fellow runner get the glory. That's how Jesus runs with us. He put aside his own glory so that he could carry us to the finish line.

Finally, friends, let me touch on our motivation or why we run the race. So we've looked at the situation, we've looked at the exhortation, now our motivation.
Chapter 12, verse 2, it says this, For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Friends, do you know what that joy was?
Have you ever asked that question? Do you know what that joy was? Jesus had everything in heaven. He had love. He had glory. He had eternal life. He had everything except one thing.
Do you know what that is? It's you. It's me. It's us. Jesus came down, experienced death, suffering, and rejection, all because he wanted you.
[13:03] Many of you know, we recently had our firstborn. And I was there with Kathy in labor, and it was a long, tough labor. Contractions lasted over 24 hours.

And at one point, these contractions were so on top of each other, there was no break, and they were so on top of each other, that a double dosage of morphine did absolutely nothing to dull the pain. Never had a double dosage of morphine, but that's pretty insane.
And yet after 36 hours in total, we welcomed the birth of our first daughter. And I asked Kathy later if she ever thought she couldn't go on, and her response to that was, never.
Pain was worth it. All that pain was worth it to hold and welcome this brand new little life into the world. That's a shadow of the love that Jesus has for us when he went up to the cross.

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That rejection, the scorn, the excruciating pain were all worth it, because he wanted to bring you home. And the joy that Jesus has for us, for you, also becomes our joy for Jesus.
[14:16] I mentioned at the beginning that we have a destination, and that destination is our joy, and our joy is a person. It's Jesus Christ. And when you run with that kind of joy, all the hardships you experience, all the pressures you experience, all the sufferings that come with running the race, they become worth it.

The gospel becomes worth it. Discernment, discipline, devotion, they're not dry obligations, but instead they're joyful rhythms and habits. So that's why, and I'm going to close this up here, but that's why in verse 3, our author commands us to consider Jesus.
Consider the joy and love he has for you and for me. Consider all that he went through for the sake of liberating us from death and sins so that we could enjoy the eternal love of Jesus.
And when you understand that, you understand why it's worth running the race. You won't want to give up because the race, the life of... You won't want to give up because the race, this life of faith, the joy of Jesus Christ, it's all worth it.
Would you please pray with me? Heavenly Father, we thank you for the joy of your son, Jesus Christ, and we pray that as we leave here that that joy that Jesus has for us would also become our joy.
[15:33] Father, give us strength and give us encouragement to know that we are not alone in this race. Pray this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. Jesus Christ.bn Amen.

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