

Running with Jonathan Edwards

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone and happy new year to you all as we begin 2024. It was about this time last year when I stood up here that I said that one of my new year's resolutions was to run a marathon.

Last year that is. And my second resolution was to do it in a personal best time. Given that it was my first ever marathon, it was if I achieved the first one I would achieve the second one automatically, which I did in July last year.

Having run that marathon, by the end of July, in fact, before I'd even finished the marathon, I resolved never to run another one again.

However, I do want to encourage you today to run. That's my goal today, is to encourage you to take up running if you have not yet taken up running and to particularly run in 2024.

Not a marathon, I wouldn't necessarily encourage us all to do that at all, but in fact to run the race of faith in Jesus Christ. So if you're someone who takes notes, I've really got four points. If you've got the translator version in front of you right now, you'll see three points there.

[1 : 29] That's because I gave it to John yesterday and I woke up early this morning in order to add a fourth point. So my four points is to run. Secondly, to run with Jonathan Edwards. Thirdly, to plan your run. And fourthly, lastly, how to run.

That's the four points for the direction we're going to take this morning. So first of all, run. New Testament letter to the Hebrews. Ash has mentioned it, just read out a section of it just then. It was written to a bunch of Christians who were losing sight of what it meant to be disciples and to follow Jesus.

The most famous section of this letter is chapter 11, verse 1, through to chapter 12, verse 3. It's the section about the great examples of faith from the past.

Chapter 12 refers to it as the great cloud of witnesses who were there, if you like, as in the stadium, watching us compete in the race of faith.

The writer is hoping to inspire the Hebrews, the recipients of this letter, with examples of those who had gone before them as faithful disciples of Jesus.

[2 : 45] And chapter 12, verse 1, is the main application of the section. So open your Bibles, it'd be great if you followed along with me here. It's the main application.

The word can mean race. It can also mean a struggle. It can mean a fight. It can mean a contest. As difficult as a marathon is to run, I think those of us who have lived long enough realise that life is fundamentally harder than just running a marathon.

It's a contest. It's a struggle. It's a fight. And the life of faith is, in fact, a fight. In fact, this whole section in chapter 12, if you continue to read on, talks about enduring.

It talks about shedding blood. It's all within the imagery of the Olympics. It's all within the imagery of fighting, struggling.

Endure is what Hebrews 12 is telling us to do. Fight the good fight. Be disciplined.

[4 : 17] Train hard. Run the race set before you. Of course, we know that that operates in a physical sphere as well for us, not just in the spiritual sphere.

Doctors will tell you that you are not going to live a good life, a healthy life, or even a long life, unless you are willing to exert yourself and sweat.

But our bodies get to a point where they will not be able to perform normal daily exertions, unless there are times of extraordinary exertions called exercise.

So what a command to a church here that was getting old, was settling into the world, losing its wartime mentality, starting to drift through life without focus, without vigilance, without energy.

Their hands were growing weak. Their knees were feeble, according to verse 12 of chapter 12. It was just easier to meander in the crowd of life than to run the race of faith.

[5 : 29] Or to treasure Jesus and pursue their joy. And so against this mentality, having spent chapters after chapters of elevating the majesty and the splendor of Jesus Christ, he then calls the church to endure, to persevere, to run, to fight, to be alert, to be strengthened.

Don't drift. Don't neglect. Don't be sluggish. Don't stroll. Don't meander. Don't wander aimlessly. Run as in a race with a finish line, with everything in life hanging on that finish line. Fight the fight of faith on the basis of Christ's spectacular death and resurrection. Now, we need help here.

We need help in the modern world because we are convinced in the modern world that the chief aim of life is our happiness and our comfort.

On the most part, we are busy, incredibly busy, with secondary to-do lists and neglecting the importance of working hard to grow in treasuring Jesus.

[6 : 54] Growing in God's faith and growing in God's faith and the gospel joy. And the gospel joy that comes as a result of that. So I want to do something here this morning, which I've done before in the past.

I want to turn to someone who, if Hebrews 11 was taken right through into the 18th century, this man would be included in this list of those who have run the race as part of the cloud of witnesses. And I want to encourage us to run with Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan Edwards was born on the 5th of October, 1703.

He died March 22, 1758. He was a preacher, a theologian, a philosopher, a missionary to First Nations people in America.

And he was the first president of Princeton University. Edwards is considered now by both secular and Christian historians alike to be the greatest Protestant thinker America has ever produced.

[8 : 02] He was a small-town pastor for 23 years in a church of about 600 people, because back in those days, everyone went to church. He was a missionary to First Nation peoples for seven years.

First president of Princeton for a few months before he died. He reared 11 faithful children, giving credit to his wife on that one as well.

And the more you understand his life, you give even more credit to his wife on that one as well. He reared 11 faithful children. He worked without the help of electricity, without emails, word processors, computers, or even sufficient paper to write on.

He lived only till he was 54, which I'm turning in a few months myself. Yet this man, in such a short life, led one of the greatest spiritual awakenings of modern times.

He wrote theological books that administered to people for more than 250 years. And did more for the modern missionary movement, the global advancement of Christianity, than any single person of his generation.

[9 : 35] A remarkable individual. Now, as a teenager, Edwards wrote down, a teenager mind you, right? This is before social media and gaming.

And he wrote down 70 resolutions to govern his life. And to help cultivate growth as a disciple of Jesus.

70 resolutions. He went on to reread this list at least once a week to keep his mind focused and renewed.

These resolutions sustained his vision for God and drove him to persevere and grow as a disciple of Jesus. I've printed out maybe 10, 15 copies of those resolutions.

They're not hard to access online. You can grab them online and you'll see the remarkable focus of this man. And my prayer for us this morning is that we will see something here that will give us a new sense of zeal and commitment to the most important things of life.

[10 : 47] And there are four broad exhortations, if you like, from the life of Edwards that I want to focus on this morning. I'm not going to go through all 70 resolutions.

You'll be grateful to know that. The first thing I want to say is Edwards exhorts us to radical single-mindedness in our occupation of spiritual things.

Two of his resolutions that he made in 1723. He was almost 20 when he wrote these. Resolution number 44.

Resolved. That no other end but religion. Now when he uses the word religion, what he means by that is the Christian faith. Resolved. No other end but religion shall have any influence at all in any

of my actions.

And that no action shall be in the least circumstance any otherwise than the religious end will carry it. Number 61. Resolved. Resolved.

[11:50] Resolved. Resolved. Resolved. Resolved. That I will not give way to that listlessness which I find unbends and relaxes my mind from being fully and fixedly set on religion, whatever excuse I may have for it.

I think that's the application of the Apostle Paul's principle in 2 Timothy 2 verses 4 to 6. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs.

He wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer shall be the first to receive share of the crops.

What happens for many of us in the busyness and the difficulty of life is we start to give way to amusements and diversions and hobbies just to survive emotionally.

They don't just become helpful things. They become our way to survive emotionally. The evenings and the days off are filled up with harmless, enjoyable diversions and what happens is before too much longer the whole focus shifts.

[13:09] The radical urgency of the kingdom priorities fade. The wartime mentality shifts to a peacetime mentality.

The lifestyle starts to get cushy. The all-consuming singleness of vision of life evaporates. I want to ask you, in all seriousness, how many Christians do you know, how many Christians do you spend time with, who are laboring, and I use that word intentionally, laboring to know God.

Who are striving earnestly to study of the scriptures and prayer to enlarge their vision of God.

So the first exhortation from Edwards is to be radically single-minded in our occupation of spiritual things. Secondly, Edwards exhorts us to labor earnestly to know the scriptures in particular, to know the Bible in particular.

Don't get your vision of God secondhand. This is Edwards' example himself.

[14:33] An early biographer of Edwards said that he came to his pastorate, his church in Northampton. He says he had studied theology, not chiefly in systems or commentaries, but from the Bible.

Edwards once said in a sermon, Be assiduous. That is, I had to look that up. Showing great care and perseverance.

Be assiduous in reading the holy scriptures. This is the fountain whence all knowledge and divinity must be derived. Therefore, let not this treasure lie by you neglected.

He was an amazing example in his own diligence in studying the Bible himself. One example. I think you can see this Bible from memory in a museum in Germany, if I'm correct.

He grabbed a Bible. He took the binding off the Bible, separated every page of the Bible, put a blank sheet in between each page and bound the whole thing back up again and drew a line down the middle of every blank page.

[15:58] And the blank page, the two columns were just filled with notes, page after page after page, notes of the scriptures as he studied them.

And then when they were filled, he turned it sideways and wrote over the top of his notes the other direction. I think there is reason to believe that Edwards really did follow on his 28th resolution. Resolved. To study the scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently as that I may find and painfully perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

I find this resolution to be a rebuke. How many of us have a plan of growing in the grasp of the whole terrain of scriptures?

I don't mean the terrain of just the Bible verses to prop up my theological preferences. I mean the whole terrain of scripture.

[17:13] How many of us have a plan of growing in that way? Do we labor over the scriptures in such a way that we can plainly see that today we understand something that we did not understand yesterday?

Some of us work at reading books on the Christian life with a view of growing, but have no plan and no sustained effort to move steadily and constantly forward in our understanding of the Bible.

Study the Bible so steadily and constantly and frequently that you can clearly perceive yourself to grow in them. Resolution 11 is one of the reasons why he made such amazing progress in his

theological understanding.

It says, Resolved. When I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances do not hinder.

What he's saying there is his resolution was not to be a passive reader. He read with a view to solving problems.

[18 : 36] Most of us in the modern world are cursed with a bent towards passive reading. We read, if we do, in the same way that we watch TV.

We don't ask questions as we read. We don't ask, Why does that sentence follow that sentence? How does this paragraph relate to the one that was there three pages earlier?

We don't ferret out the order of thought or ponder the meaning of terms. And if we see a problem, I think we habitually just leave them to the experts.

Thirdly, Edwards exhorts us to redeem the time and to do what our hand finds to do with all of our might. His sixth resolution was pretty simple and powerful.

Resolved to live with all my might while I do live. Resolution five was pretty similar. Resolved never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.

[19 : 55] He was a great believer in doing what you could in the time that you have, rather than putting things off to a more convenient time. He was clearly a person who was disciplined in mind and body and spirit.

He would spend up to 13 hours a day in his study. He rose early, even for non-electricity and alarm days.

In fact, he was probably entirely serious. I read it as a joke, but he was probably entirely serious when he wrote in his diary in 1728, I think Christ has recommended rising early in the morning by his rising from the grave very early on the Sunday.

I commend for your consideration whether such care to maximize time and effectiveness in devotion to the pursuit of God and his word is what the preacher meant when he says in Ecclesiastes 9 verse 10, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

Fourthly, the theological, the biblical labor of Edwards exhorts us to study for the sake of hearts of worship and for practical obedience.

[21 : 44] What you see in Jonathan Edwards is the sweet marriage of reason and affection, of thought and feeling, of head and heart, of study and worship that took place in the life of Edwards that I think is rare today.

So the final exhortation from Edwards is to recover what the old-time Puritans used to call logic on fire or fire with joy and obedience.

Edwards did not pursue a passion for God because it was an icing on the cake of his faith. He wanted to be smarter than everyone else in terms of the Bible.

For him, faith was grounded in a sense of God which was more than what reason alone could deliver. In other words, it is to no avail whatsoever merely to believe that God is holy and that God is merciful.

For that belief to be of any saving value at all, we must have true delight in it of what it is in and of itself.

[23 : 18] We must delight in that truth for it to have saving power. Otherwise, the knowledge of God is no different than what Satan has.

Satan knows that he's merciful. Satan knows that he's all-powerful. But Satan does not delight in that knowledge of God. Does that mean that all of his study was in vain?

Not at all. He said, the more you have of a rational knowledge of divine things, the more opportunity there will be when the Spirit shall be breathed into your heart to see the excellency of these things and to taste the sweetness of them.

So the goal for Edwards was not just growing in knowing God, but growing in delighting in God, in savoring God, in relishing in Him.

for all of his intellectual might and frankly, he was a very, he had a very powerful mind.

[24 : 32] But Edwards, for all of that, Edwards was the furthest thing from a cool, detached, neutral, disinterested academic.

Disinterested academic. We often fall on one side or the other for the donkey on this.

We're either the academics who are coolly detached or we're people so-called filled with the Spirit, alive in Jesus but don't know the Scriptures. Edwards rebukes both.

He was as intent on cultivating his passion for God as he was cultivating his knowledge of God. He said, or he wrote, seek not to grow in knowledge chiefly for the sake of applause and to enable you to dispute with others but seek it for the benefit of your souls in order to practice according to what knowledge you have.

[25 : 46] This will be the way to know more. Edwards is remarkable in this. He said, the moment in your study of the Scriptures, the moment you don't put something into practice from your study is the moment you stop growing in knowledge.

Knowledge is to be put into practice and the moment you don't put into practice is the moment you stop growing in knowledge. The greatest thing I think that we can learn from Edwards, I think, is that God is glorified not most by being known nor by being dutifully obeyed.

He is glorified most by being enjoyed. If you've been around St. Paul's a while, you will potentially put together my love for Edwards.

in our vision statement, treasuring Jesus together for the joy of all people. The joy, treasuring Jesus and joy go together.

Edwards wrote this, God is glorified not only by his glory being seen but by being rejoiced in. when those who see it delight in it God is more glorified than if they only see it.

[27 : 27] In other words, the disciplined life, the goal of a disciplined life is the joyful worship of God and the undisciplined life robs us of delighting God, our greatest joy.

So that brings me to my third point that is and I'll briefly run through this stuff, plan your run. The essence of the challenge for us as we step into a new year is to plan your run with Jesus.

News of a terminal illness, attending a funeral, they are often times when we focus on what really matters in life.

The sharp realities of life come to bear on us in that moment. And I think the beginning of a new year may be a distant but a relatively close third as well.

We must labour to ensure that the most important things stay the most important things in life. So be inspired by in Edwards.

[28 : 39] Get some plan in place to grow in the important. Don't coast, don't meander, redeem the time. That's the challenge from Hebrews and Edwards. For the past year, we have been constantly saying here at St. Paul's encouraging you to take your next step.

We have the good news of the gospel. It's written out there on the board straight behind me here.

We have the good news of the gospel and on the other board we have what the gospel gives us.

Embrace the good news of Jesus Christ and you end up with a life of satisfaction and meaning and hope and in other words, joy. They are the consequences of trusting in Jesus.

So how do we pursue, pursue, pursue the gospel in our life in order that those consequences might grow more and more and more in our hearts and our minds.

We're going to be talking more about that in our vision series in a few weeks. But to get Hebrews and to put Edwards together, I just want to say one thing about planning your joy.

[29 : 56] Pursue godly habits in life. Pursue spiritual disciplines, spiritual practice, diligently pursue them, train in those things, sweat in those things.

we're going to emphasize seven things as we move forward. Weekly worship, daily devotions, Christian community, use of our talents, the service of others, generous giving, witness of the gospel, and rest.

Rest. something that we do not know how to do in our modern world. Now I'm not expecting any of us to be the next Edwards, the next Jonathan Edwards, or to take on all of his disciplines.

He was a remarkable man who I think we should just frankly admire. But I do want you to take your next step. I do want to exhort you to a discipline life.

Because life and faith is a race and therefore all of us have at least one next step to take. At least one next step to take.

[31 : 29] Lastly, how to run. As a, someone who's done a bit of running over the years, more recently, and trained for a marathon, marathon, I had to Google how to run a marathon.

How to actually run a marathon and get advice from a bunch of people, how to train for a marathon, all that sort of thing. So how do you run the race of faith? life? life. life. So this is my last point, but let me just say, very significant point.

How to run the race of life and faith. This is the crucial dynamic. It is, if you like, the petrol in your engine. Reading for the beginning of Edwards' resolutions, and it sets the tone for the entire 70 of the resolutions, Edwards wrote this right at the beginning, being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these resolutions so far as they are agreeable to his will for Christ's sake.

Hebrews 10 puts Edwards' introduction in these, sorry, Hebrews 11 puts it in these words. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and the perfecter of your faith.

You might say the pioneer and the perfecter of your race. Jesus is not simply the pattern of life and faith, he is the completer of it as well.

[33 : 13] He is the only one who has perfectly lived it and he did it for us. So I'm not just exhorting you to a life of discipline.

I'm exhorting you to a life of discipline that's focused on Jesus who has run the race before you and completed your race for you. There is a great gulf between the understanding that God accepts us because of our efforts and the understanding that God accepts us because of what Jesus has done for us.

religion operates on the principle that I obey and therefore I am acceptable to God.

The operating of the Christian faith, the operating principle of the Christian faith is I'm accepted by God through what Jesus Christ has already achieved for me and therefore I obey.

Therefore I pursue. Therefore I run the race. Two people living by those two very different principles may in fact look the same.

[34 : 30] They may even be sitting beside you in church now. They both pray. They both give generously. They're both loyal and faithful to family and the church and they're good citizens but they live it out with radically different motives.

Religion tries to live out divine standards out of fear. If we don't live a disciplined life then we fear we'll miss out on God's blessing now in this life and in the next life to come every time something bad happens in life.

And you go, hang on a bit, what? Oh, I haven't been reading my Bible, I should have gone to church and give a little bit more money. That's a life of fear. Gospel motivation is gratitude for the blessing we have already received because of Jesus.

That's why the writer to the Hebrews spends 10 chapters exhorting the Hebrews about the supremacy and the magnificence of Jesus Christ before he says run.

Run. Gospel motivation is gratitude for the blessing we have already received in Jesus Christ.

[35 : 55] While the religious person is forced into obedience, the Christian rushes into it in a desire to please and to resemble the one who endured the cross for them, for their joy and for his.

And so my exhortation for you this morning, today, beginning of 2024, is rush, rush, rush into obedience with joy.

Look to Jesus and the gospel, plan your run with him and take your next step of faith in 2024.