

## Running for Joy

It's August of 2021, and we are mesmerized by the world's athletes at the Covid-delayed 2020 Olympics. These men and women train relentlessly for years. Their days are long with fatigue and sweat and self-denial, yet such perseverance is indispensable to win gold. It is a quality of heart of every Olympian. It is a quality of heart of Jesus followers too.

*...And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV)*

Consider the perseverance of Jesus. Like an athlete, Jesus endured physical hardship, weariness, hunger, and pain. Athletes have disappointments with injuries, mistakes or their progress. Jesus had disappointments, too. To name just one: disappointment from His disciples repeated failure to grasp His mission. Further, instead of high hurdles, Jesus faced obstacles from men who should have been rejoicing at His arrival. Instead, His opposers "did not know the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:44, ESV), and were jealous, skeptical, insulting.

And yet Jesus was relentless; His face was "set like flint" toward His goal to be the sacrificial lamb of God. His perseverance was beyond the grasp of even an Olympian. Why?

The writer of Hebrews says we should consider Jesus' motivation: "...for the joy set before Him." The source of His joy? The approval of the Father, the triumph over all evil and darkness, the consecration of His bride, the church, and an infinity of glory lay before Him. The joy will flow from a culmination of victory, exultation and, yes, pleasure that we cannot even imagine. And yet, we are "co-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17, NIV). *We will share in this joy!*

Hebrews chapter 12 provides several instructions to enable us to run as Jesus ran.

1) *...let us throw off everything that hinders...(Hebrews 12:1, NIV)*

When we see Olympians take to the track, or the swim lane, or the gymnastic mat, we see them cast aside any jacket or sweatshirt. These garments are fine for some purposes, but they would critically undermine their athletic performance. What are we "wearing" that gets in our way as a Christian runner? These things are not necessarily sin (don't worry, we'll get to that next), but these things bog us down, or perhaps distract us from serving God. There is an expression that says we sometimes let what's "good" keep us from what's "best". More to our point here, we can be captivated with the good instead of the godly. These are the things that always have to be attended to, before we attend to God's will. And in so doing, we may never get to God's will at all.

2) *...let us throw off ... the sin that so easily entangles. (Hebrews 12:1, NIV)*

Some sins have a particular propensity for easily entangling our particular self. Maybe it's an old sin rut left over from our life before Christ. Maybe it's brought on by some inescapable situation in our life, people we live with or family. Maybe our deteriorating culture has deemed the sin "ok." Hey, no sweat, everyone is doing it, right? Maybe it touches on some long held hurt, insecurity, or weakness. These sins trip us in our walk with God. Like a runner letting a net

or rope wrap around his legs, we fall on our spiritual faces. But we have a gate to bar sin from entangling us; it is the entrance to our mind. If we allow sinful thoughts into our minds, if we entertain them and make them comfortable instead of casting them out, sin will follow.

*Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. (Romans 8:5, NIV)*

3) *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. (Hebrews 12:7, NIV)*

If you live on this planet earth, you will have hardships. However, just as an earthly father disciplines His offspring with unpleasant restraints, we can know our hardships are used by our heavenly father to teach us discipline. Maybe our earthly fathers were good discipliners, maybe they weren't, regardless, our heavenly Father is perfect in His discipline. For those of us following Jesus, we can rest in the Father's love instead of despair. We can rest in the comfort that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28, NIV). This passage is written without limits and as such it encompasses even the tragic and the inexplicable in this life. We can rest in our humbled condition because we know God has declared,

*a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise. (Psalms 1:17, NIV)*

### Questions for Reflection

First read the entire passage of Hebrews 12:1-12

- 1) What otherwise innocent activities, indulgences, practices, or associations are keeping you from using your spiritual gifts? Or, displaying 1 Corinthians 13 love? Or, picking up opportunities laid before you to advance God's kingdom?
- 2) What sins are besetting you and causing you to fall behind in your spiritual race? Or, causing you to avoid seeking God? Or, hurting your godliness before non-believers?
  - Have you rejected the sin's precursory thoughts, refused to dwell on them, or thrown them out of your mind as soon as they enter?
- 3) Are you dealing with hardships with an attitude of complaint or despair? Or, are you seeking God to teach you His lesson of discipline in the midst of hardship?
  - Are you trusting that hardships, even the confusing ones, are for your ultimate good? Have you memorized verses (not one but multiple verses) that confirm His love for you?

## Conclusion

We are all runners in a race that God has designed perfectly, and individually, for each one of us. Parts of the race are smooth and level and cool and dry. Parts have hills, and mud pits, and briars, and vines that can entangle us. The smooth parts encourage us, and the hard parts stretch us and train us.

The race is urgent, not only for ourselves, but also for other runners who are watching us, and for the kingdom we serve. We *must* finish the race and we *must* win the prize.

*Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. (Hebrews 12:12)*

Do not grow weary, spiritual Olympian, the host of heaven, led by Jesus, is applauding you, and a prize of joy beyond measure awaits you at the end of your race!

*Father God, teach us how to run the race so as to win the prize. May we engage with your training regimen in whatever form it takes. Renew us so we may persevere. Your son said we could ask for anything in his name, and so we humbly lay these requests before you. Amen.*

Bill Norton's work career was in engineering, marketing and management and he holds two master degrees. Currently, Bill serves part time in local government and with a crisis pregnancy center, and he is a student pilot. Bill's passion is teaching and writing: he has a book in progress on his African missionary experience, has been published in local periodicals, and teaches the Bible frequently.

Please visit [www.billnortonauthor.com](http://www.billnortonauthor.com)

