

“Ready to Run” GPPC 8-14-16
Isaiah 5:1-7, Hebrews 11:29-12:2

I’ve been a not-all-that-fast long-distance runner off and on since the age of 17. And like many of you, over the decades I’ve completed dozens of races. The shortest have been 5K (that’s 3.1 mile) races and the longest was an ill-advised 50K (31.1 miles). To be honest, I first started running in high school hoping to get my legs strong enough so I could dunk a basketball. And you’ll be pleased to know it worked. I have dunked several times on those Fisher Price plastic basketball goals. Woe be unto any child who gets in my way when I drive to the hole and throw it down.

Back when I first started racing, there was no Internet and we actually had to drive to the running shoe store in Spartanburg and peruse the stacks of race entry forms. Typically a form would tell you the date, time, race distance, course description, entry fee, age-group awards, and which organization the race proceeds benefited. Of course, there was also a place to indicate t-shirt size, and there was a medical release form to sign.

Jeff Paschal

Some of the entry forms were honest and accurate. “This is a hilly, challenging course and part of it is cross-country.” But I still remember a 50K race that claimed it would be conducted on soft dirt roads with gently rolling hills. In truth about 20 miles out the course turned into a giant sunbaked sand trap.

Nowadays, race entry forms still can be found at the running shoe stores, but they’re also on-line. And the races have added all sorts of ploys to attract participants.

There are color runs in which racers are pelted with various colors of washable paint as they go along. Why? I do not know.

There are obstacle course races and races that take you through deep mud and races in which you are chased by zombies. And who doesn’t want to be chased by zombies?

For long races, such as marathons, there are impressive finisher medals about the size of a dessert plate. Age group winners get sparkling trophies, and top overall winners sometimes collect cold hard cash.

There may be huge cheering crowds lining the streets, marching bands, rock bands, country bands, and cheerleaders. In some races, you can

Jeff Paschal

partake of odd refreshments not only after you cross the finish line, but along the way. Krispy Kreme donuts *while* you run. Beer *while* you run. Doesn't this seem a tad unwise? But it's all designed to attract runners to the race. What's the feature, the reward that will entice them to run? What is it?

The writer of Hebrews wants us to imagine the Christian life as a race. What is it that will get us to run this race? And what is it that will keep us running when the race gets hard?

We don't know who wrote Hebrews, but we know the writer was well-educated and eloquent. Though the text is called the "letter" to the Hebrews, scholars say is actually more like a sermon probably written between 60 and 100 A.D. The original audience was most likely made up of Jewish and Gentile Christians who were facing some persecution, getting tired and discouraged, and who were tempted to give up their faith. In response, the writer of Hebrews distributes a race entry form (actually a *reentry* form) to these beleaguered Christians.

The race *reentry* form says, "By faith God's people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land...By faith the walls of Jericho fell after

Jeff Paschal

they'd been encircled seven days...By faith Rahab the prostitute didn't die with the disobedient, because she received God's spies in peace."

Do you notice a pattern? By faith, everybody in this race is doing great. Nobody is lagging behind. Nobody is getting lapped or dropping out. By faith, everybody listed is having tremendous success.

The form continues. "Hey, what more can I say? There's not enough time to mention everybody, but what about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets? Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched fires, escaped death, won wars..."

Do you see the pattern here? Through faith, all of these people were victorious, even miraculously victorious. What's more, the writer even throws in a couple of surprising names. Rahab, the prostitute, for one. And we say, "Seriously, writer? Do you really need to mention Rahab the prostitute? We're trying to run a family worship service here, you know." And then he also mentions Jephthah. In Judges 11 Jephthah's foolish vow caused his only daughter to be sacrificed. How

Jeff Paschal

did he make the Hebrews honor roll? Scholars really debate why these Rahab and Jephthah are listed among the other Old Testament stars.

But I wonder if these two individuals are also included, because, though they were flawed, they still operated by faith. Though they were imperfect, at the end of the day, they still trusted God and followed.

Maybe the writer wants us to say, “Hmm. If a prostitute makes the list of the faithful, maybe I could be included too. If somebody with poor judgment could get into the race, maybe my name could be added as well. For that matter if Samson, with his little Delilah problem, and the adulterer David make the cut, maybe a sinner like me could be faithful too.” I wonder if the writer not only wants us to be inspired by the list of heroes and heroines of the faith, but also to think, “Maybe somebody with faith as messy and uneven as mine could also be included.” Do you think so?

So far the *reentry* form has mentioned all positive things that come from getting into the race—miraculous successes, conquering kingdoms, whooping up on lions, giving foreign armies a beat down. At the top of the form it reads in capital letters and exclamation points, “THE

Jeff Paschal

COURSE IS ALL SOFT DIRT ROADS, GENTLE ROLLING HILLS, AND TREE-LINED STREETS. YOU'RE GOING TO LOVE RUNNING THIS RACE!" And we say, "Sign me up, baby!"

But then we turn the form over on the back and the tone lurches from giddiness to horror and the rest of the race course is described. It says, "Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured. Mocked. Chained. Imprisoned. Stoned to death. Sawn in two. Killed with the sword. Poor. Persecuted. Tormented."

Still want to run the race?

What's going on here? The writer is showing us the other side of faithfulness. Yeah, there are times when faithful people enjoy amazing, even miraculous triumph. Life is glorious. The sanctuary is packed. We're holding candles, swaying, and singing Kum Bah Yah.

But faithfulness does not always look like that. The toothy grin of a televangelist urging us "just claim the victory" is noticeably absent from this picture. The healthy and wealth gospel that fills the airwaves is silent. Sometimes faithfulness looks like failure. Sometimes its taste is bitter. Sometimes faithfulness feels like torture and smells like death.

Jeff Paschal

A scholar says the Greek word translated as “torture” here is, “A *tympanon* ...[you’ve heard of a timpani drum] a kettledrum which has a skin stretched taut for striking... Those who were tortured...were stretched over a wheel and whirled while being [beaten] with rods to break their limbs until they died.” (George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, 203.)

Legend has it that the Prophet Isaiah (whose writing we read earlier this morning) was later sawn in two, a kind of death mentioned by the writer of Hebrews. (Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 350) Isaiah spent much of his adult life preaching God’s judgment and mercy to God’s rebellious and beloved people. What did he say to God and what was he thinking as he was cut in two?

This is one of the awful mysteries of faith. While some people live in faith and seem to have relatively successful, unscathed lives, this is not the experience for much of the church. Just ask Martin Luther King, Jr. beaten, cursed, slandered, spat upon, and finally murdered for his faith. Just ask Archbishop Oscar Romero murdered for his faith by government troops in El Salvador. Just ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer imprisoned, tortured, and then hanged by the Nazis because of his faith.

Jeff Paschal

Just ask billions of ordinary Christians whose faith has not only brought them gladness and hope but also great suffering, loss, and resistance not only from people outside the church but inside. Often, it seems, the more faithful we are, the more difficulties come our way.

New Testament Professor Frances Taylor Gench says, “Hebrews speaks of ‘faith’ more than any other book in the New Testament...It speaks of faith as active in obedience...to persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances and to step out into the unknown with courage and live in a risky and vigorous way.” (Frances Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James*, 63.)

Do we still want to run this race?

“Absolutely,” says the writer of Hebrews. He paints a picture for us. It’s a stadium filled with spectators, except they are more than just spectators. They are called “witnesses,” people who not only watch what is going to transpire but who have actually participated in it themselves, sometimes even as martyrs. We are surrounded on all sides by witnesses, “a great cloud of witnesses,” as we toe the starting line of the race. And before the starting gun is fired we’re called “to lay aside every weight

Jeff Paschal

and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, its shame, and even now is seated at the right hand of God.”

Do we still want to run this race? Yes, we do. Suppose today each of us goes home and takes a good long look in the mirror. We look at our lives. What is it that weighs us down? What sin or sins is dragging us down? Is it anger? How about pettiness or gossip or lust or worry? Could it be apathy about building a deeper relationship with God? Maybe it is a self-centeredness and arrogance that refuses to be concerned with improving the lot of our suffering brothers and sisters. Look in the mirror and look at our lives today.

And then pray for God to help us lay aside those weights, those thoughts, words, and deeds that hold us down and hold us back. And then listen for the crowd. Can we hear that great cloud of witnesses who've gone before us? Maybe they're parents or grandparents or teachers or youth leaders or pastors or friends or someone else. They've already run the race, and now they cheer us on. Can we hear them?

Jeff Paschal

They're yelling, "We know the race is long and it is so difficult. It's a marathon. But you can do it. Be faithful. Get your head up. Look to Jesus who has also run the race, even enduring the cross. Look to Jesus and run the race of faith, because he is not offering you a t-shirt or medal; he is offering you life as you run with him. He is offering you joy as you run with him. You can do it. Ready now? Run!" ©Jeff Paschal