
Running the Race

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 17 August 2025

Hebrews 11:29-31,39-40;12:1-2 • Luke 12:54-56



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We saw in the short video we watched that the young man considered life to be a race, a race that he wants to win. This is not news, I'm sure. Some people talk about the "rat race", which brings to mind those little mazes which rats are put through in laboratories, where the rats have to run forward and choose which path to take — but they can't exit the maze itself until they get to the end. Some people seem to battle their way through life, treating every problem as a personal challenge; and that is not bad, unless you start to think that life is against you, and you have to fight all the time. I've known people like that. My brother sometimes seems to feel that everyone is against him, and that he must fight his way through. It is not a good way to look at the world.

But you may be thinking, well, life is hard, and sometimes you have to fight your way through. That's true. We've all had times when there seem to be no easy answers to our problems, and everything is going wrong, and we can't seem to get a break. This is not new — even Shakespeare, who lived 500 years ago, could write, "How all occasions do inform against me!" He put those words in

Hamlet's mouth, who you will recall had a few problems of his own, like, his stepfather killing his father and marrying his mother. These things do happen. Life can resemble a soap opera sometimes.

The apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews, which is where our reading about running the race comes from. "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us," he wrote. In a race you have to deal with several potential problems: you may not have prepared for it properly, and your muscles may be stiff. You may not have enough lung capacity to handle the demand for oxygen your muscles are making on your lungs. You may miss your footing, stumble and fall. And to add to all that, you're not alone: there are others around you running the same race, and they may pass you or even get in your way as you try to move forward. You must persevere — Paul's word — in order to win. You must get through all those obstacles.

So Paul uses this metaphor to represent life. You can think of your life as a race. It can be either your whole life, or just a part of it. Maybe you're preparing to enter university. What are the things you have to do to make that happen? There might be particular courses you have to take, and that means a lot of study and sitting exams. There might be fees you have to raise. There will be distractions along the way. To reach your goal, to get to the point where you're sitting down on your very first day in your very first class as a university student, you'll probably have to put some things aside, some other maybe-more-fun activities that you'd like to do, but you prioritise your study instead. This is the kind of thing Paul is talking about.

But Paul takes it a step further. The race he's talking about is your whole life. People spend their lives in many different ways. I was a student for a lot of years — my wife claims that given the chance, I'll always go back to school. I had a rock band for a few years. I worked in a bank. I worked in a big computer company. I traveled to an exotic land known as New Zealand — and stayed! You will have a different life, although isn't it interesting that with all the differences between my life and yours, our lives still intersected right here in this little church? If you could draw a line on a map showing all the places I've been to since I was born, over *here* somewhere, and another line showing all the places you've been to since you were born, over *here* somewhere, they would cross right here in Prebbleton. I don't know why I find that so interesting, but I do.

Back to Paul: he's interested not so much in the line itself, and all the stops along the way that you make in your life. He's most interested in the end of the line, where you end up. God has promised us as Christians that the end of our lives can be with God, in eternal love and Communion with God. And for Paul, that makes the whole journey worthwhile. Of course the stops you make along

the way and the choices you make in your life are important, because they affect where you end up. To Paul, ending up with God in heaven is the most important thing that can ever be — that is the prize that the runner gets when he or she wins the race. It is so incredible a prize that we cannot even imagine it. All the troubles we had along the way, all the problems, all the pain, will fall away, and there will be love and happiness and contentment in God's presence.

So, how do we win this race? We do it by staying in touch with God. Regular prayer is important, for that is how we communicate with God, and how God communicates with us. Paul says that we should pray constantly. That sounds difficult, but just think of it as a running conversation. Prayer does not always mean sitting down and bowing your head. You can pray while you're walking, while you're lying in bed, while you're on your way to work or class.

Keeping your priorities straight is important too. We should always put God first. We should ask ourselves: is what we're doing serving God? And remember, we serve God by serving God's people, so every time we help someone, we are serving God. Thinking of others before we think of ourselves. Supporting other people in their journeys through life. Involving ourselves in good things: things that build up other people and our community. And improving ourselves, through education and studying God's word, the Bible, so that we can make ourselves the best we can be, for God.

This is how we run the race to win, to gain that amazing, unbelievable prize of eternal life in the love of God. It may be difficult at times, when we encounter troubles or problems. But remember that God will always help us to win, because God wants us to win this prize. God's wish is that all his people will win the prize, and gives us every chance to do so. It's really the only race that matters. So let us give thanks to God our Father and Jesus our brother, as we prepare to give it the best run we possibly can. Amen.