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Sermon Summary #36

To Run, Meander, or Coast: What's Your View of the Christian Life? Hebrews 12:1-2

Not all Christians will appreciate or respond positively to what I have to say this morning about the nature of their relationship with Jesus Christ and what it means to live as a Christian. I'm sorry to have to begin this message on such a negative note, but the fact remains that many of those who profess to follow Jesus have a horribly distorted and unbiblical perspective on what is meant by the Christian life. Let me explain.

Some of you envision Christianity as summed up by your conversion experience. You once were lost but through God's grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit were led to saving faith in Jesus Christ. You were born again. You trusted Jesus to forgive you of your sins. But beyond that you've made negligible progress. In fact, you're somewhat oblivious to the fact that any spiritual progress is even called for or needed. You might even have been heard to say: ***"Isn't it enough that I believe in Jesus? Must I do anything more? After all, I show up at church on occasion and avoid scandalous sins. Does being a Christian really entail much more than that?"***

This is the sort of person who put the pedal to the metal, so to speak, when they first came to saving faith in Christ, but after that the "car" of their Christian life has been coasting. In other words, there was an initial burst of spiritual speed at the start, at conversion, but ever since that time they've put themselves in cruise control. As far as they are concerned, just so long as they don't put their spiritual life in reverse, and just so long as they don't veer off course into the bar-ditch of immorality and apostasy, all is well. Nothing more is required. Just hold things steady and observe the spiritual speed-limit and everything will turn out fine.

Others who profess to be followers of Jesus bank everything on some glorious spiritual and highly-charged emotional experience when they walked an aisle at a revival service or signed a card or raised their hand when prompted to do so by a traveling evangelist. Perhaps you had a religious crisis encounter at youth camp or in a moment of desperation cried out to God for help.

In any case, ever since that moment you've slowly *meandered* your way through the Christian life. You haven't deviated completely off course, but you've come close. If someone were to have followed your journey they would note that you often veer off to the left, and then to the right, and may for a while simply stand completely still. But the bottom line is that there is very little energetic commitment to pursuing Christ and growing deeper in your knowledge of him. Spiritual growth strikes you as too time-consuming, too costly, and probably unnecessary.

So, my question to you this morning is this: When it comes to your Christian life and your relationship to God, do you *coast*, do you *meander*, or worst of all, do you either *stand still* or move in *reverse*? That is the question this passage compels us to answer. And what we are about to hear from the author of Hebrews is a loud clarion call for all of us to *run* passionately after holiness all the while fixing our spiritual eyes on Jesus as the model of our faith.

I love the way the NT uses *athletic metaphors* to describe the nature of the Christian life. You may recall that the apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, portrayed his Christian experience as if he were both a runner in a race and a fighter or boxer in the ring. In 1 Timothy 6:11 he tells us to "flee" or run away from evil things and in v. 12 he exhorts us to "fight the good fight." In 2 Timothy 2:5 he compares the Christian life to an "athlete" who "is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." And in his final words before his execution by Nero he says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

To come straight to the point, Paul knows nothing of "coasting Christianity" (Piper). He refuses to acknowledge any sort of so-called Christianity that is not actively running a race or fighting a fight. Some of you may wish it were otherwise; you may prefer that the Christian life be compared to a vacation at the beach or a gentle walk through

grassy meadows or a holiday on a cruise ship or perhaps even a lazy, late-afternoon nap on the back porch. But no one in the NT, not the apostle Paul and certainly not the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, ever speaks in such terms.

Here in this justly famous passage our author exhorts both his first-century readers and us, with an urgency that you can almost feel, to **run** with single-minded devotion and intensity the race that has been set before us. Like I said, not all of you like to hear that. You've grown comfortable in the ease and safety and prosperity of Christianity in the western world. You face very few threats politically or economically and no one here, as far as I know, has been threatened with torture and martyrdom for confessing faith in Christ. "So why don't you leave well enough alone, Sam. Why stir up a hornet's nest with all this talk of running and fighting?"

The answer is obvious: it is because **God will not leave us alone. God will not tolerate professing Christians who either coast or meander or amble or stroll or wander aimlessly through life. He commands us to run!**

Evidently these first-century Hebrew Christians had grown tired. They were spiritually pooped! They were initially **fired up** for faith in Christ but had gradually gotten **fed up** with the pressures and persecution that came with being a Christian. In Hebrews 10:32-33 our author reminded them of the "former days" when they had first come to Christ and had suffered persecution for their faith. Yet all through the letter there are indications that these people had grown tired and had slacked off and were on the verge of "drifting" (cf. 2:3) away from the Lord whom they supposedly loved and trusted.

Last September we celebrated our 20th year as a local church. That may not seem very long, but it's easy in that period of time to sort of settle in and lose your spiritual vigilance. It's all so very easy to become accustomed to the routines of life in a local church and lose your razor's edge. The *groove* in which you find yourself has almost imperceptibly become a *grave*. People forget that we are in a war and our enemy, the Devil, never, ever takes a day off; indeed, he never takes a minute off. Many say to themselves: "Well, you know, I've been a Christian for a long time. I've put in my tour of duty. I've served in a variety of ministries. It's high time I eased off the gas pedal and coasted for a season. I think I've earned it."

Well, Hebrews 12:1-3 is a loud blast from the trumpet or a shrill sound from a whistle or a shot fired from the starter's gun that says: **"You're in a race! Your soul is at stake! Your enemy is alive and well and seeking whom he may devour! Put aside every distraction and run! Strip off every encumbrance and run! Set your sights on Jesus and run!"**

If you think that this sounds dangerously inconsistent with salvation by grace alone through faith alone, you've misunderstood what our author is saying and what I am saying. No one is suggesting that you are to "run" *in order to* be saved, but instead that you must "run" *because* you are saved. Being justified by faith and forgiven of all sins and adopted into the family of God is not the end but only the beginning of what it is to be a Christian. And those who refuse to "run" may well be sending a signal that they have never truly come to know Christ in a saving way. All this is something of a prelude to what our author will say in v. 14 of chapter twelve: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

So let's look closely at what we are being exhorted to do. Although it may not be clear from the English translation of this passage, there is **only one central and controlling commandment**; only one imperative; only one exhortation. It is found at the close of v. 1 – **"let us run** with endurance the race that is set before us." Everything else in this passage either gives us reasons for doing so or provides instruction on how it is to be done. So let's start with the command.

Run!

There is a lot of truth about the Christian life wrapped up in the imagery of running. It tells us that **following Christ is both vigorous and rigorous**. I'm not saying that you should never engage in quiet reflection or prayerful rest or undistracted meditation on God's Word. Of course we should. But even these exercises are *disciplines* designed to refine us and make us more like Jesus. We reflect quietly on the grace and greatness of God so that we will be strengthened to say no to ungodly lusts. We are prayerfully attentive to God so that we will be energized to resist Satan and all his beguiling ways. And meditating on God's Word is like filling up the tank of your car with

combustible gasoline. It's designed to ignite your spirit and give focus to your affections and fill you with the spiritual fuel you need to get back on the road, running at full speed.

I fear that the spiritual "running" of many professing Christians is more like what happens on a treadmill than what happens on an open road. A lot of energy and sweat are expended but you don't make any progress, you don't get anywhere. And if you do actually find yourself engaged in an actual race, too many yield to the temptation to take a short cut.

Do you remember the name of Rosie Ruiz? Rosie was a Cuban-American who was declared the winner in the female category for the 84th Boston Marathon in 1980. People were stunned by her victory, as her recorded time was the fastest ever run by a woman in Boston Marathon history. But eight days later she was stripped of her title when it was discovered that early in the race she had dropped out, hopped on a subway, only to re-emerge about a mile from the finish line where she joined the other runners and staged her stagger across the finish line in dramatic fashion.

What Rosie did makes for a good laugh, but there are no short-cuts in the marathon of the Christian life. The progressive transformation of our character into the image of Jesus himself calls for a **sustained, life-long commitment**. We are told here in v. 1 that "endurance" or "perseverance" is required. The good news is that the Holy Spirit is always present to empower us and to provide us with whatever strength and incentive we need to succeed.

And let's never think that when God calls us to run that he has in mind repetitive laps that ultimately get us nowhere. We are not to run aimlessly, as if there were nothing objective to gain by it. I can't help but think of my days playing basketball for Duncan High School in the 1960's. Our coach, Ray West, would regularly send us to the bleachers to run stairs for having committed some flagrant foul or for not hustling as much as he thought we should. One day a player named Nick, whose last name I will not mention, was sent to run the bleachers. For whatever reason, Coach West and the rest of us got caught up in practice with something important and poor Nick was left to his meaningless trek up and down those bleacher stairs. By the time someone noticed he hadn't returned to the floor, he had slowed down to a turtle's pace and was near unto total collapse. Coach West apologized profusely, but I'm not sure Nick ever forgave him.

Be assured that God does not ask us to run aimlessly on the bleachers as punishment for our misdeeds and sins. The race we are called to run with endurance has a goal. There is a finish line. Paul speaks of it in Philippians 3 as "the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).

Surrounded by Witnesses

Our author also provides us with a *motivation* to run: "**since** we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (v. 1a). He's obviously referring to the men and women of faith that we've just looked at in Hebrews 11. The key question is, what does our author mean by the word "**witness**"?

Typically the first thing people want to know when they read this verse is whether it means that believers from the OT and NT who've already died and gone to be with Christ are watching us as we live our daily Christian lives on earth. That is certainly a possible interpretation; but it's not probable. Let me explain why.

The word translated "witness" can mean one of two things. It can refer to someone who **observes**, who watches; that is to say, someone who is a **spectator**. If that is what he has in mind the idea would be that we should run knowing that countless saints of the OT as well as NT believers who have died are actively watching us, much like a crowd of spectators in the grandstands surrounding the track, or lined up along the roadside of a race like the Boston Marathon or the Tour de France.

But "witness" may also refer to a person who gives testimony in a court of law. In other words, someone can bear witness or testify to something he/she has done or seen. And that is certainly true of those OT saints. They bore witness or gave testimony through their lives to the grace of God and the possibilities of a life of faith. Their lives of faith are the evidence, so to speak, to which they direct our attention that God is worthy of our trust. If this is the meaning of the word, then it isn't so much that they are looking at us but we are encouraged to look to them and

their witness and in doing so be encouraged and strengthened and reminded of what can be accomplished when we exercise faith in God.

Perhaps both ideas are in his mind. If so, he envisions the OT saints as having first borne witness through their lives of faith and perseverance and then to have taken their seats, as it were, in the amphitheater in order to observe us as we in turn run the same race. This does not necessarily mean that all those who have died and are now in heaven with Christ are actively watching everything we do on earth. There may be a small measure of truth in that, but I doubt that's what our author has in mind.

Remember: this is an *analogy*. The Christian life is being *compared* to a race. Don't press the details of an illustration so far that you end up with bizarre conclusions. The point of the passage is that these ancient OT saints are envisioned as spectators in the amphitheater because *their lives of faith are viewed as exerting on us the same kind of influence and motivation that the shouting crowds undoubtedly had on the participants in some athletic contest*. After completing the race, the witness or testimony of their lives shouts to us, "By faith I finished, and so too can you!"

How should we Run?

So, how should we run? There are three answers given in our text.

First, we must "lay aside every weight" or as some translations render it, "encumbrance" (v. 1b). What in the world does he mean by this?

Think of those who compete in the Olympic Games. They strip down to the bare minimum to reduce friction and to free up their legs and arms to perform more effectively. My guess is that many of you have worn ankle weights when you've gone jogging or heavy wristbands to strengthen your arms. But if you were to compete in an actual race, you would take them off. Or consider a batter in baseball. He will stand in the on-deck circle swinging his bat with what is called a "doughnut" on the bat. It's a weighted ring that, when removed, is designed to make the bat feel lighter. But no one ever comes to home plate and tries to get a hit with that weighted ring or doughnut on his bat. The player has thus "laid aside" the "weight" that might encumber his performance.

Likewise, we are being told that if we hope to live a maximally fruitful Christian life we need to shed everything that might weigh us down or hold us back or distract us from being entirely focused on what God has called us to do. *These aren't necessarily sinful things*. These are things that very likely are never mentioned, far less condemned, in Scripture. And they probably differ from person to person. What may be an encumbrance or weight to you isn't to me, and vice versa. For some it may be TV or the Internet or Facebook or certain movies or a style of music or video games or hidden candy or romance novels or daytime soap operas or alcohol or a favorite sports team. He's talking about anything that has the tendency to dull your spiritual senses or to slow you down in your running after holiness.

I want to share with you one of the most helpful things I ever heard with regard to this passage. I can't recall who said it, but it has to do with *how we justify certain activities in our lives*. Whenever any activity or hobby or event or endeavor comes your way, you have to make a decision: *Should I go there? Should I do that? Should I hang out with him/her? Should I watch or participate or eat or drink?* And often we answer by asking in return: ***"What's wrong with it?"***

If that is the only question you ask and the only criterion you employ, the answer will often be: *"Nothing. There's nothing inherently sinful or wicked about this activity. And the Bible nowhere explicitly forbids it. So why shouldn't I enjoy myself?"* But instead of asking, "What's wrong with it?" we should ask, ***"Does it help me run?"*** Carefully assess everything in your life, even the things that are permissible, and ask: ***Does this strengthen my faith or weaken it? Does this intensify my love or leave me cold-hearted? Does this make holiness more appealing and accessible or stand in the way? Does this encourage me to serve others sacrificially or to live selfishly? Does looking at this or listening to that intensify purity in my heart or corrupt it?*** The answer to that sort of question may well change your decision and perhaps even the direction of your life entirely!

Second, we are to run by laying aside the “sin which clings so closely” (v. 1c). He doesn’t appear to have any particular sin in mind. It is sin in general: anything in word, thought, or action that hinders you or slows you down in your efforts to run. You know what these sins are. I know what they are in my experience. And all of us need to aggressively wage war against these obstacles to running the Christian life.

And don’t respond to this by saying something like: “Well, I tend to be more *passive* in my personality and the whole notion of ‘running’ and ‘fighting’ just doesn’t comport with who I am and where I find myself in life.” Others are, by nature, more *aggressive*, and may respond by saying: “Sorry, but I’ve tried everything to change and I can’t. I’m settled in my ways. The cement is dry and I can’t be any different from what I am right now.”

I’ll concede that people are different. No two people are exactly the same. Everyone is “wired” in a unique way to be who they are. But it is worse than nonsense to respond that way. It is sinful. God has not given us this exhortation for no reason or with the understanding that some of us are exceptions.

So let’s connect this with something that’s been much in the news of late: the release of the film, *50 Shades of Gray*. Is the book on which the movie is based, as well as the film, merely a possible “weight” or “encumbrance” that may or may not hinder your Christian life, or does it qualify as a “sin” that we must lay aside? In other words, what does this passage say about whether or not you should go to this sort of movie? I have never read a word of the book and I have no intention of attending the film. And my strong feeling is that neither should any of you. You don’t need to read filth or watch sexual perversion in order to be relevant or culturally sophisticated or to keep up with the times or to be able to communicate with non-Christians.

Let me simply say that the question you should be asking about this movie isn’t, “What’s wrong with it?” (and by the way, the answer, in my opinion, is: a whole lot!), but “Will it help me run?” Well, will it? I’ll leave it to you and your conscience to provide the answer.

(I said there are three ways in which we are told to “run”. We’ve looked at the first two. Now the third.)

Third, we are to run “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (v. 2).

This word “looking” doesn’t quite capture the force of the original text. It means something along the lines of riveting one’s attention; fixing one’s focus; staring intently without allowing the slightest distraction. Be single-minded in your pursuit of Jesus! Keep the eyes of your faith and the meditation of your heart and the focus of your affections on Jesus only! Failure to do so will almost inevitably lead you to veer off course.

So, study Jesus. Spend time in prayer with Jesus. Make Jesus your model. Be sensitive to his example. Be open to his leading. Worship him. Adore him. Prize him. Treasure him.

Perhaps the best illustration I can give you of what is being said comes from something in my own experience when I was only 7 years old. The photograph you are now looking at was taken in the spring of 1958. The place was Shawnee, Oklahoma. The event was a track and field competition known as the Little Olympics, sponsored each year by the local Kiwanis Club. Each elementary school selected its fastest first-grader to compete in a special race. I was the fastest first-grader at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School. If you’ll look closely at the picture you may be able to recognize me: I’m the one on the far right with the ‘W’ on his shirt. That man standing just behind the finish line is my dad.

The reason my dad got permission to stand there is that although I was extremely fast, I had a difficult time running in a straight line! I tended to veer off to the left or to the right. So he told me: “Sambo [yes, I know!], when you hear the starter’s gun, run as fast as you can and never, ever, not so much for a single, solitary second, take your eyes off me. If you do that, you’ll win.” Well, as you can see from the right hand corner of the picture where my mother carefully inserted the first-place, blue ribbon, my dad was right. I won.

What makes this especially interesting is that in the lane to the far left is Russell Compton, from Irving Elementary School. You will notice that he is looking to his left, at me. He finished second. By the way, even if he *hadn’t* looked across the track at me, I would have smoked him! But you get my point.

There are two ways in which the analogy of this race in 1958 breaks down. First, I was competing in the 50-yard dash. It was a *sprint* that lasted only a few seconds. But when our author exhorts us to “run” he’s talking about a *life-long marathon*. We don’t stop running until we enter the presence of Jesus at death. Second, this is not a “race” in which we are competing against other people, least of all against other Christians. In the Mascot race at the Little Olympics in Shawnee my chief competitors were Russell Compton and Steven Searle (who finished third). I defeated both of them. But we are not attempting to defeat other Christians. In fact, our aim should be to help them run even faster and straighter and with greater determination than they currently do. And if they happen to exceed us in spiritual growth and maturity we should rejoice.

But I hope the point is made: we must run with the eyes of our heart and the focus of our faith fixed on Jesus! The reason is two-fold.

First, Jesus is “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (v. 2a). He is the “founder” or “pioneer” of our faith in that he has provided us with *the perfect example* of how we are to run: by drawing upon the power of the Holy Spirit and trusting the truth that there is great reward in godliness. Not only that, but he is *the origin and source and giver* of all faith. This is what we see in Hebrews 13:21 where we are told that God equips us with everything good to do his will “through Jesus Christ.”

So we must never, ever think that whatever success we experience in running, the glory or praise or credit goes to us. All glory goes to *Christ who both set the pattern and supplies the power* for us to do anything at all.

Second, Jesus is our model for how to run the race insofar as we see the *goal* that undergirded and empowered him. How in the world, we ask, could someone disregard the shame and pain of being crucified, of being nailed to a tree and dying such an unimaginably horrific death?

The answer is that he had set his sights on the “*joy*” that awaited him on the other side of the cross, following the resurrection. It was the joy of restored fellowship and intimacy with the Father. Jesus spoke in John 17 of how his Father would restore to him the “glory” that he had in the fellowship of the Trinity before the foundation of the world. It was the joy of being “seated at the right hand of the throne of God” as stated right here at the close of v. 2. It was the joy of leading many sons and daughters to glory (Heb. 2:10) and spending eternity in fellowship with those sinners whose lives he was able to redeem and save by his sufferings. In other words, *what sustained Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane* and through the flogging he endured by the Roman soldiers and eventually being nailed to a cross, was *the hope of joy beyond the cross*, joy in relationship with the Father and joy in eternal fellowship with you and me!

Some people protest and say that it is mercenary to run the race in order that we might attain to a joy that is superior to anything this life or its sinful ways might afford. But that is what Jesus did. And so should we. The joy of seeing Christ and feeling his delight and bringing him honor and entering into the fullness of life in the new heavens and new earth is what should stir us to run, run, run.

Was this not the incentive that moved King David of old? Did he not say that it is “in God’s presence” that one finds “fullness of joy” and at God’s right hand that we experience “pleasures evermore” (Ps. 16:11)? It was in order to secure that “joy” and “pleasure” that David made difficult and often sacrificial choices. If that “joy” and “pleasure” promised by God is not enough to ignite obedience in your heart and sustain you through hard and tempting times, nothing else will.

There is a joy inexpressible and full of glory that is set before us. Invest your hope in it. Run to lay hold of it!