

Running the Race of Faith

by Coty Pinckney 7/24/08

The Bible is full of images that help us to understand the Christian life: we are part of the army of God, engaged in battle; we are part of the body of Christ; we are Christ's ambassadors, his envoys, representing him in this world; we are a building, being built up into Christlikeness; we are branches, Christ is the vine; we are the bride of Christ; we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. All of these analogies are rich and useful.

My favorite analogy, however, compares the Christian life to running a race. This analogy is not common throughout the Bible, but Paul loves it, as he uses the running and racing image at least nine times in his epistles. In addition, the author of Hebrews uses the analogy once.

The analogy is particularly rich for me because I am a product of the running boom. I grew up during a period when mile world records would be the lead headline of the sports section; when an American set two of those world records; when 100,000 fans filled a stadium to witness a track meet between the US and the Soviet Union. Then came the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. That summer, as a 16 year old who had been running competitively for less than two years, I watched Jim Ryun, the mile world record holder and my boyhood hero, fall in his 1500 meters heat and thus fail to make the final; I watched Steve Prefontaine, an American runner only five years my senior, make a game effort to win Olympic gold in the 5k; and, most importantly, I watched Frank Shorter demolish the field to win the Olympic marathon. After those Olympics, millions of Americans began running, many hoping to complete a marathon. Every teenage boy in the country who was already running competitively began to dream of mile world records and marathon victories. I was no exception.

I remember at that time searching the Bible for references to running, and especially recall encountering 1 Timothy 6:12, which I underlined in my Good News New Testament: "Run your best in the race of faith."

I competed seriously as a runner for the next 22 years, at distances from the half mile to the marathon. Over the decades I learned more and more of the intricacies of this deceptively simple sport. We run from the time we are toddlers, but I was still learning about running in my last years as a competitor. I trained smarter, raced smarter, and ran with better form as a 38 year old than at any time in my past.

At that point, knee problems developed that have ever since limited me to running only a few miles a week. But the lessons I learned about running have carried over into my spiritual life.

After God opened my eyes at the age of 26 to the depth of my sinfulness and my need for Him, there have been strong parallels in my life between periods of disciplined running and periods of strong spiritual growth. As I studied again as an adult those same biblical running analogies that had impressed me as a teen, I saw them in a new and deeper light.

For many years I have wanted to preach a series of sermons on these analogies, bringing out the biblical truths, using the insights I have as a (former) serious runner. Other than one sermon preached in 1995, the time has never seemed right.

But with the Beijing Olympic Games approaching, at long last we will turn our attention to these images. The next two weeks, July 27 and August 3, we will consider biblical truths that arise from training for competition: "Are You a Runner? Consistency and Discipline in the Race of Faith," and "Train Through Pain Yet with Joy for the Race of Faith." The final three sermons consider biblical truths related to running races. These will be preached between August 10 and August 24, during the Beijing Olympics: "Stay Focused and Alert During the Race of Faith," "Work Hard Yet Relax During the Race of Faith," and – the last sermon, preached on the day of the Olympic Men's Marathon – "Maintain Your Form and Finish Well in the Race of Faith."

The Christian life is a race. The Lord Jesus Christ is both the Head Official and the finish line itself. We are not out for a leisurely afternoon jog; we are running a brutally difficult marathon. If we are to complete the race, if we are to finish well, we must fight the demons of doubt and weakness and sin inside us; we must fight the demons of distractions and hindrances and opponents around us; we must remind ourselves constantly who we are and what our goal is; we must both rest and work hard; we must be continually alert.

Join us for the series. And may God be pleased to use His Word to enable each one of us to say with Paul:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

Your fellow runner and coach, preparing you for the race of faith,

Coty