

## RUNNING IN THE REIGN

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Hebrews 12:1-2, John 18:33-37

When I was in high school, I was a member of the cross-country team. I wasn't very fast. I ran mostly with the JV team. But I did have good coaches and developed an appreciation for running and have continued running off and on since then. Over the years, I have competed in a bunch of races and have even completed three half-marathons. My goal, of course, is one day, hopefully, to complete a full marathon.

One thing I have learned from my experience is that running a race like a half-marathon is not an isolated event. You don't just wake up one morning and out of the blue declare, "Today, I will run a half-marathon." Unless you are some sort of superhuman athlete, to compete in a long race requires training. For the average person, to properly prepare for a half-marathon requires at least eighteen weeks of preparation. You simply have to put in the miles to get your body ready for a race. You have to train.

Training is not the only component of preparing for a race. I have discovered there is another aspect to running that is completely invisible. My neighbors will see me running through the neighborhood. What they don't see is me making a myriad of choices about running. To prepare for a race requires countless decisions. There are the big, obvious decisions such as, "Do I really want to run a half-marathon?" If the answer is no, then that will be the end of that pursuit. If the answer is yes, then that leads to other decisions: What will be my training plan? What are my goals? How much am I willing to sacrifice for this? As you go, the decisions generally become smaller but are still important: It's raining outside, do I really want to run today? What am I going to eat? How much sleep should I get? Is it time to replace these shoes? These are the choices that are required every day, choices that are the factors in success or failure.

To the casual observer of a half-marathon, when they stand on the sidelines, all they see is the runners passing by. To these observers, the

race is just a single, isolated event. The observers can't see the months and years of training and the untold decisions that got the runners to this point.

The same is true for any significant event in our lives. For example, I can attend my nephew's high school graduation and all I see are kids dressed in robes crossing a stage to collect a piece of paper. I don't see the years of study and commitment and the countless decisions they made to get them to that stage. What I also don't see are those kids whose decisions led them to other places.

The book of Hebrews is about choices and the decisions that we make. Today's reading even talks about running a race.

Today's sermon concludes our seven-week series from the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is not the most exciting portion of our scripture, but I have developed a strong appreciation for what it is doing. We call this book a letter but it is actually a sermon (or an essay) written to a particular congregation in Rome in the late first century. This congregation had been struggling for some time. Some of its people had chosen to leave the church; others were considering doing so. It is the belief of the writer of Hebrews that the members of this congregation did not have a complete understanding of who Jesus was. What they knew about Jesus was not enough to sustain them in times of personal difficulty or spiritual crisis. So the writer sets out to show them how Jesus is crucial to their salvation. Jesus is the Son of God and part of God's cosmic plan for the salvation of the world.

Since most of the members of the Hebrew congregation are Jews who converted to Christianity, the writer talks to them in terms with which they will be familiar. He talks about the high priests in the temple who make sacrifices for the sins of the people. The high priests pour out the ritual blood of animals and they sprinkle the altar with burnt offerings. They make these offerings continually. Hebrews tells us that Jesus, on the other hand, is a high priest whose sacrifice is not the blood of animals, but instead is his own blood. Jesus sacrifices only once. It is sufficient. The high priests sacrifice for the sins of the flesh. Jesus' sacrifice is for the sins of the conscience. The high priests

sacrifice for forgiveness. Jesus makes his sacrifice for redemption—to enable people to be changed.

In the end, the Letter to the Hebrews is about choices. What do the people in that congregation choose to do? Do they choose to seek salvation through Jesus or do they choose to wonder off looking for answers somewhere else?

The writer reassures them that they are not alone. Other have gone before them. We call these the saints and Hebrews identifies them as *a cloud of witnesses*. These are the members of the faith who have gone before and who embrace all who follow them. The writer tells his people to *run with perseverance the race that is set before us*. As they run, they are to look to Jesus who is the *pioneer and perfecter* of the faith. Think of the pioneers who crossed our nation. They struggled through the wilderness to find a new home. They blazed trails so that other may follow. As a pioneer of the faith, Jesus is the one who goes ahead of us, setting the way. Jesus' way led to the cross, but he went there willingly, despite the shame that it brought him. In the end, Jesus *has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God*.

The choice that the writer puts before his people is 'how do they run.' Do they run with perseverance all the way to the end or do they quit the race when they've had enough? Running is tough. A runner will encounter fatigue, cramps, sore muscles, blisters, and more. Hebrews is challenging his people to stick with the race and not give up. They may not fight blisters but they will encounter temptation, persecution, doubt, and more—the obstacles that will cause them to quit their faith, to leave the race.

Hebrews wants the people to remember that they are not alone, that they are surrounded by the cloud of witnesses. This cloud of witnesses are the spectators lining a race. But they are not just observers, they are also runners who have run this race before. They stand along the race course cheering the runners towards the finish, offering encouragement, pointing out the route to any who get lost.

As they run, they are to look to Jesus. No matter what the people may be struggling with, Jesus has gone before them. Jesus has

experienced temptation and doubt and persecution and suffering. He is the pioneer of all they may experience. He endured the suffering of the cross and death because he knew of the ultimate joy that it would bring to those who followed him. He was blazing the trail of salvation. The cross was not an instrument of glory; it was an instrument of shame. Yet, despite the shame of the cross, Jesus *has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God*. He is now our king.

The people of the Hebrews congregation would have known the account of Jesus' crucifixion and the events leading up to it. They would have known of his being arrested and being brought before the Roman governor, Pilate, on charges of sedition. They would have known of Pilate's interrogating him and asking him, *Are you the King of the Jews?* And Jesus telling him, *My kingdom is not from this world... For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth*. Pilate then asks Jesus, *What is truth?* We don't know if Pilate is asking, "What is this truth that you testify to?" or if he is cynically questioning the existence of any kind of truth in the world. It doesn't matter because the truth is what the book of Hebrews is proclaiming to the world, that Jesus is indeed king. He sacrificed himself so that we may know the salvation of God.

The best way to conclude this sermon series is to revisit the opening words of this book. Listen to these words:

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

Amen.