Run the Race: An Enduring Faith

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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Earlier this summer, I had the good fortune to pick up the book we just saw highlighted in that video. *The Boys in the Boat* tells the tale of the United States rowing team that won gold at the 1936 Olympic Games, held in Nazi Germany. When I opened the book, I knew very little about rowing, but what I did know told me that it was a sport of endurance. Anyone who’s ever picked up a paddle or oar, or even just exercised on a rowing machine, knows the physical strain the rowing motion puts on an individual; it is a whole-body sport. Not only that, it is an exceedingly mental sport: a rower has to have incredible focus and the ability to tune his or her mind and body to a single, repetitive action, over…and over…and over again. In larger crew events, like the 8-oar race the book recounts, it gets even more difficult: each rower not only has to master his or her own mind and body, but also must match that sustained effort with that of every other rower in the boat.

In the 1936 finals, the United States crew faced a couple of extra obstacles. Out of the six boats in the race, only the United States and Great Britain had to deal with a vicious current that slowed them down. In addition, one of the most important rowers in the American boat, Don Hume, was ill; he spent the first half of the 1 ¼ mile race rowing mechanically, barely acknowledging the instructions the coxswain Bob Moen was shouting as he tried to get the American boat back in the running for a medal. Yet somehow, near the end of the 2000-meter course, the Americans dug deep. Through the pain, through the obstacles, they surged ahead, past the other five boats, even Hitler’s chosen crew, and claimed the gold – a tribute to their endurance that day.

It’s an inspiring story, one that stirs the patriotic heart of any American who hears it. Yet the most fascinating part of this story is that the boys in the boat were masters of endurance long before they put their oars in the water near Berlin. These were children of the Great Depression, sons not of privilege, but of blue-collar workers, who learned endurance not just to win an athletic competition, but simply to survive. Rower Joe Rantz, the central figure in the book, is representative of the other 8 Americans who won gold as part of that team. Born in Washington State in 1914, Joe’s mother died when he was only 3 years old. Joe was sent to live with an aunt, only to suffer from a long illness and be returned to his older brother’s care when he was 5. When his father remarried, Joe joined his father and stepmother, yet faced an even more difficult future. After several years of tension and conflict, Joe’s father and stepmother abandoned him – at the age of 15. For the next several years, Joe looked out for himself: felling trees, poaching salmon, even stealing moonshine to sell for a profit.

Eventually, Joe had a chance to attend the University of Washington to attain a university degree and find more security in life – but there was no guarantee he would be able to afford tuition. He worked as a janitor at the local YMCA during the school year, and spent his summers toiling on road construction crews, in the hay fields, and even on the Grand Coulee Dam to earn the funds needed to continue his schooling. For years, Joe faced great trial – physical strain, emotional turmoil, even the harsh realities of the Great Depression – and he endured. The other eight men in the boat were essentially just like Joe: lumberjacks and laborers who knew what endurance was all about long before they raced for gold in Berlin.

This month, we are considering what the book of Hebrews tells us about running the race of faith. Last week, we heard the account of Abraham, a great example for us about the importance of having a hopeful faith. Yet the story did not end with Abraham. As we read on in this summary of the history of faith, we find more evidence of the importance of running the race of faith well. Additionally, we gain insight into one more important element we need to have the mature faith Jesus calls us to attain. What do we need in addition to a hopeful faith? An enduring faith.

Our text for today begins with a litany of great role models of faith from the history of Israel. Some are stories like the story of Joe Rantz, of men and women who endure trial and circumstance to stand victorious. The Israelite people themselves, in the exodus from Egypt and conquering of the Promised Land, endured the terror of passing through the Red Sea and besieging the stronghold of Jericho. Rahab, one of the inhabitants of Jericho, endured the mental strain and emotional stress of aiding an enemy of her people, because she knew them to be in the right. Other champions of Israel and stars of the biblical record are lauded for their faith in the face of difficulty: the judges Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, the prophet Samuel, the king David.

It is important to note that none of these were perfect. Samson and David were womanizers. Gideon was led astray by the allure of public opinion. Barak exhibited a stubbornness that forced God to change his plans. Jephthah lost his daughter to his arrogant pride. Samuel failed to raise his sons properly, and they turned to corruption in his old age. Rahab was a prostitute. And the people of Israel? They took 40 years to travel the 861 miles from Egypt to the Promised Land precisely because they were complainers; in addition, time and again they wandered away from their commitment to God. All of these examples are of victorious, triumphant heroes of God – but heroes who are deeply, deeply flawed.

What is it that these heroes of faith have in common? What makes their story worth repeating in Hebrews’ retelling of the past? Whatever trials they faced, whatever obstacles came their way, whatever personal failings they had, they endured. And that endurance led them to victory! These men and women were lauded for conquering kingdoms, administering justice, obtaining promises, shutting the mouths of lions, quenching raging fire, escaping the edge of the sword, winning strength out of weakness, becoming mighty in war, and putting armies to flight…all because, according to the author of Hebrews, they endured in their trust in God. What inspiring stories of faith! Surely, then, the secret to success, the magic key to a life of triumph and achievement is found in this: endure in faith, and all will be accomplished.

Except…Hebrews doesn’t stop there. It doesn’t stop with the faithful heroes of old who endured and emerged victorious. The author goes on to call to mind the nameless masses who also endured, even though they didn’t conquer kingdoms or establish justice or shut the mouths of lions or survive the fire. Verses 35-38 reminds us that many who had an enduring faith did not exactly triumph. Torture, mocking, flogging, imprisonment: these were the lot of many heroes and heroines of faith who endured. Others suffered horrendous executions: stoning, sawn in two, beheaded, fed to the wild beasts. And countless unnamed champions of an enduring faith suffered the loss of financial independence, personal safety, mental health, or even having a home. They became persecuted wanderers on earth…and yet they endured, remaining faithful to their Lord. Of them, Hebrews tells us, the world was not worthy. Their faith – even though it did not find success in this life, even though it led to their suffering and even death – the enduring faith they had was somehow exemplary. God looked at them, we are told, and commended them. God valued something more than apparent success. They received his approval, his praise, because they possessed one thing: a faith that endured.

Like the heroes of old, we will often face times of trial and testing. Maybe it will be a personal conflict or illness, where a relationship is endangered or our health, or the health of a loved one, is compromised. Maybe it will be a temptation to set aside our integrity or our morality. Maybe it will be a call to take a stand for justice, speaking out for the voiceless and urging God’s way of love and peace, even when it is unpopular. Maybe it will be a test of leadership where people are looking to us for solutions. Maybe it will be an external threat, like a financial crisis or natural disaster. Wherever the trial or temptation comes from, we are all like these champions of faith: we will face times of difficulty. They endured in faith, whether they found victory or defeat, success or failure, praise or persecution. We can receive God’s praise, his approval, as well – when we develop a faith that endures.

Yet the author of Hebrews reminds us that, for all of their endurance – and for all of ours – an enduring faith is incomplete without one thing: God’s provision. God had a plan, you see, even as the Israelites were marching around Jericho and David was killing giants and martyrs were being stoned and beheaded and torn apart in the arena. That plan would center on a person, a man named Jesus, who would live, teach, heal, suffer, die, and somehow rise again. In and through all of that, God would perform the greatest miracle of all, the redemption of the entire world that he intended from the very beginning. In and through Christ, the promise has come true. In and through Christ, we can be made perfect in God.

In fact, even though we have plenty of examples in Scripture – what the author of Hebrews calls “so great a cloud of witnesses” – we really only have one role model. Jesus, we are told in chapter 12, is our pioneer, our prototype for how to run this race of faith. And what do we find was a hallmark of his faithful witness? Endurance! Our text today tells us that he endured the cross…for a purpose. In the midst of his greatest trial, he looked ahead and focused on what God had promised, on what he knew to be true – that salvation lay through the path of death and resurrection – and so he endured. Indeed, this is what faith is, as scholar David Gray puts it: “Faith allows people to see beyond what is right in front of them, their daily problems, to see what God is doing in their midst, to see what God has done throughout the ages, and to see the future joy God has in store for us.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Jesus showed us perfectly how to run the race of faith with endurance.

So, then, it falls to us. We have entered the stadium, and stepped out upon the track that we call the life of faith. The stands are filled with those who have gone before – the Davids and the Samuels, the prophets and the judges, the martyrs and the persecuted. They showed us what endurance looks like. And there, out before us, the person in whose footsteps we run, is Jesus. He pioneered this race of faith, he perfected this race of faith, he endured this race of faith. And now, it’s our turn. We come to the starting line, the gun sounds, and we are off. It’s our turn to endure. Do we have what it takes to run the race?

We do if we follow the teaching we find in Hebrews 12:1. There, we are given two practical steps we can take to make sure our faith carries us forward in concert with God’s will in our lives. First, we are told, we must lay aside the every weight and the sin that clings closely to us. Lots of things in life hold us down, distracting us from our laser-like commitment to Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. Some are simply weights, the myriad of responsibilities and events and demands on our time and attention that distract us from God’s work in our lives and our response of faith. Family, friends, work, entertainment, events outside of our control – all of these can weigh us down in the race of faith. I know there have been many times when I have felt overwhelmed by all that is happening in my life, and in those moments, it is difficult to run the race well, to endure.

Other times, we have habits and choices we make that we know are not in line with God’s will for us. We choose the path of selfishness or greed. We let our lusts or anger or gluttony or sloth get the better of us. We sin. And what happens? We grow distant from God, the source of our strength. We develop a reputation that tarnishes the image of God in us. We grow jaded with God’s work in the world, because we’re shutting him out of our life. We get weighed down by sin, and it keeps us from running the race of faith with endurance. Hebrews tells us we need to cast these things aside, intentionally choose to keep the weight of life and the encumbrance of sin from claiming control in our lives. That’s the first step to running the race well.

The second practical step Hebrews tells us is needed in running the race of faith well is to persevere in the race that is set for us. God has called each one of us, and my calling is not the same as your calling, or your calling, or your calling. We each have our own race. And while I might admire your race, I’m not called to run your race. I need to stick with what I know God has called ME to do. I need to persevere, and so do you. When we do, we may succeed beyond our wildest imagination. We may be the catalyst for dozens or hundreds to come to faith in Christ, we may influence public policy to be more in line with God’s sense of justice and mercy, we may serve as conduits for God’s healing and grace to a hurting world. Or, despite our best efforts, we may find that the time just isn’t right, and our effort doesn’t seem to accomplish much. No matter, the author of Hebrews says. Our job isn’t to win the race – that’s up to God. Our job is to run the race with perseverance, with endurance. Our job is to live out an enduring faith.

Earlier we heard a bit of the compelling story of the Boys in the Boat, American working-class kids who took on the rowing might of Nazi Germany at the 1936 Games. However, the real hero of the 1936 Olympics wasn’t to be found in the American boat at the Olympic rowing venue. The real hero was on the Olympic running track. Jesse Owens remains one of the greatest athletes who ever lived. In an era before wind-resistant clothing and rubberized tracks, he was nothing short of mind-blowing; his world-record in the long jump would stand for 25 years, and as recently as 2004 would have seen him as the 9th place finisher if he competed in the Athens Olympics. In 1936, as Hitler and the Nazis proclaimed a gospel of racial superiority and fascism, the African-American Owens would win four gold medals – not just an amazing individual athletic feat, but a slap in the face of Nazi ideology.

Yet Owens came close to not making the Olympic team in 1936. He burst on to the national scene in the summer of 1935, setting three world records in 45 minutes at the Big Ten track-and-field meet. The next several months saw him electrify crowds across the West Coast. It seemed he was unbeatable. But as the summer wore on, personal troubles and the sheer fatigue of unrelenting competition – not to mention some pretty talented competitors – saw him turn in a string of disappointing performances and outright defeats. Owens’ place on the American Olympic Team was in serious jeopardy. It took Owens casting aside all the distractions and persevering to return to top form – and through that endurance, to stand atop the Olympic podium not once, but four times, challenging Nazi propaganda about racial inferiority in the process on a world stage. Jesse Owens was an Olympic champion, almost without equal, because he endured.

Like Jesse Owens, and more importantly like Jesus himself, we have a simple task as we run the race of faith: we must endure. Our faith must be an enduring faith. Why? Because only through faithful endurance can we hope to remain true to our calling. Only through disciplined endurance can we hope to remain focused in the midst of life’s distractions. Only through empowered endurance can we hope to cast off the sin that tangles us up and weighs us down. Only through endurance can we hope to keep putting one foot in front of the other, pressing onward as we follow the path of Jesus. Will we fix our eyes on him, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith? Will we cast off everything that weighs us down and draws us away from our Lord? Will we choose to have an enduring faith? Let us pray.

1. FotW, 354 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)