

## **STAY THE RACE**

### **Dr. George O. Wood**

I listened to a sermon some weeks ago by Dr. Watson who is an African American pastor in Georgia and it inspired me to this text today. Some of the things he shared I've even incorporated into my message today. It's from Hebrews 12:1-2. "Therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders us and the sin which so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand at the throne of God."

I want to talk to you this morning about staying in the race.

In 1968 the summer Olympics in Mexico City witnessed a powerful moment when the John Akhwari from Tanzania finally crossed the finish line – 26 miles 385 yards. He had been one of the favorite runners but early in the race he had fallen and injured himself severely. His bloodied leg was bandaged as he walked and limped the rest of the 26-mile course finishing hours after all the other runners had crossed the finish line. Word got out in the stadium among the 2000 that were left that one runner was still out in the night air of Mexico City. And when John Akhwari entered the stadium it resounded with applause. He ran the oval lap, finishing the 385 yards. When he crossed the finish line it was a thunderous acclaim as the international television audience watched this remarkable spectacle.

Jim McKay who was the ABC announcer was interviewing him after the race and said to him, "Why did you continue running when you had no chance of winning and you were so badly injured?" He responded, "I don't think you understand. My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race. They sent me here to finish the race."

God has sent you to finish the race of the Christian life. If I were to say three words to you they would be "Never give up." You may just want to get away from it all but today God has a word of encouragement for you from this text. The writer of Hebrews is giving some encouragement to some beaten, battered and bruised brothers and sisters. Some of whom are falling away because of the external adversity they are experiencing, because of their commitment to Jesus Christ. Some of them are no longer even gathering together for worship. The writer of Hebrews is telling them to stay in the race.

Let me walk you through some principles that are in these two verses that encourage us to stay in the race.

First there is the inspiration for staying in the race. The inspiration comes from the words "Therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witness."

I love that word "therefore". It is a logical word. It is a word that is used in debate. It is a word used in resolutions. Since I'm the general secretary of the Assemblies of God, I deal a lot with resolutions – whereas, whereas... therefore. Therefore is the word that gathers up the whereas and impels you into actions. It's an energetic word. Whenever you see the word "therefore" in the text of scripture you need to stop and notice what it's *there fore*.

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The connection here – therefore since we are surrounded by such a great crowd of witnesses – is it points us back to chapter 11. That’s the “whereas”s. The great cloud of saints who have stayed in the race. The saints in scripture who have stayed in the race. Hebrews 11, as you know, is faith’s hall of fame. These are, in Hebrews 11, the witnesses in our race of life. The witnesses to the early Christians. The witnesses presently. They have already taken their seats in the heavenly coliseum and from Adam through the patriarchs holy men and women, prophets, priests, apostles, row after row, from the ground up until the stadium has been filling up. Now we are on the track of life and they are watching us, not just as spectators but as ones who have also run the race and finished it.

A commentator of another century said “Multitudinous saints of departed generations, the spirits of just men and women made perfect, visibly overhead, now the militant church like a thick impenetrable cloud which we cannot reach through but which encompasses us still, our life here is a contest. It’s theater the universe, the seats are the spectators ranged through the heavens.”

We must not think of these witnesses of Hebrews 11 as simply spectators in the stands. They in their life served as an example for staying in the race. Are you struggling with staying in the race? Perhaps you’re struggling with patience. You want things to be going faster than they are in your life. Faster in your marriage. Faster in your career? Faster in your studies.

Noah tried to build a boat two football fields long and one football field wide and build it 500 miles from the nearest body of water. It took him 120 years. Are you struggling with patience? Look at Noah.

Are you struggling with having to change directions? Move to a new location. Change jobs. Doing something you hadn’t planned on doing but it’s come up.

See Abraham. He was told to leave his family. The Lord said to him, where I’m taking you, others cannot go. And he set out not knowing where he was going. Maybe that’s you this morning. You have not a clue as to what lies ahead and where you are going.

Are you struggling with past failure in your life? A sense of shame and guilt over what’s gone wrong in your life?

See Rahab. She wasn’t always joyful. The harlot of Jericho. But from her ultimately came a great, great grandson whose name we know as King David. Long after David, a man named Joseph, the husband of Mary who bore Jesus. Surely if God could use Rahab he could use you.

You could go down that list of Hebrews 11 and see the saints of scripture who lasted until the finish line and ran the race. It’s our inspiration to run the race. If I could take some liberty with the text. There are not only the saints in scripture but there the saints in our own history the inspire us. I could use so many illustrations. In the 17 years I pastored this church there were so many of you, and so many who today are not here, who inspired me to live the Christian life.

Just a few of them, random selection.

Jerry and Sharon. Sharon went to be with the Lord just 11 months ago. She died of cancer after about a 10-year struggle. She had a vibrant, absolutely infectious life testimony. Always joyful. I knew Sharon when we were in college together. I always blamed Sharon that I lost the race for

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student body president because she was my campaign manager. A few months before she died, she had this huge tumor and dealing with it that had grown externally on her body. She said to me, "I look pretty normal. Death is a reality. You have to plan. It's good to face death even though it doesn't come to you. I'm each day going to enjoy life." And all that was within her power she enjoyed life to the end.

And Jerry stood by her side faithfully ministering to her. They inspired me in the race of life.

I think of Harry and Sue Ann. Harry is the contractor who built this church, one of my closest life friends. In fact when I was going through a deep depression in the early 90s probably I owe where I'm at today to Harry and Sue Ann's willingness to spend hours walking me through that difficult midlife crisis.

I remember when Harry had a heart attack when this church was under construction. Not a good thing when your contractor has a heart attack! I raced down to the Mission Viejo hospital and got permission to go into ICU and Harry's first words to me because we both had insurance that meant that if either of us died the church would be paid for. His first words were, "George, if I die, the church will be paid for!" He seemed cheerful. I said, "Harry, don't you dare!"

Harry went to be with the Lord a little over a year ago. A year before that his beautiful wife Sue Ann who had no sign of disease suddenly went within 24 hours from diagnosis to death from an incredible blast of leukemia that had hit her body. I heard that she was in emergency. I called Harry, not knowing the severity of her illness. When he answered the phone I said, "Harry! What's this about Sue Ann being in the hospital?" His answer to me without any other introduction was simply, "A beautiful lady has just gone to be with Jesus."

They lived with such tremendous grace and had had so many adversities but they always were persons of good cheer helping others.

I think of the young widow named Stella who it's my joy to have in the audience today. It was way long ago, 28-29 years ago that John her young husband who was our church organist, they'd just been married a short time. John at the age of 31 just fell over from a heart attack and instantly was in the Lord's presence. Stella was left as a young widow coping with the loss of her husband and the fact that she had a baby to raise. In God's provision ultimately Keith entered her life and made a wonderful home for Stella and her daughter and the family that came to them.

But I shall never forget when Stella was a young widow not too long after John had died. Christmas season rolled around. I asked two members of our congregation to speak to the congregation on the them "How Different From Our Dreams." I selected Stella because she was dealing with loss. And I selected another young man who at about the age of 32-33 was already a multi-millionaire. He had gain. So there was loss and gain. I wanted to represent to the congregation that the Christian life and often the congregation embodies people who are going through joy and are going through suffering. And that here are no easy cookie cutter answers to life issues.

I'll never forget Stella's testimony that morning before Christmas. She, as a young widow in her late 20s, stood before our church audience and said, "I have absolute certainty that the Lord uses suffering in my life as a refiner's fire. Perhaps I could never learn the meaning of love unless the

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object of my love was removed. Perhaps I would never learn to trust God until I was made to follow his voice in darkness. Perhaps I would never get strong unless I reduced to utter weakness. Perhaps I would never come out of myself and enjoy the friendship of others unless I lived on a daily ration of loneliness or the depths of the wisdom and the wisdom and the knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out. One day everything will look clear to me when I look at my past through resurrected eyes.” Powerful testimony.

A powerful example to me is the young widow staying in the race.

I think of John and Eileen. John was working a secular job when we invited him to come. He had such a heart for missions that we just said by faith come and go to Mexico and American Indian reservations, wherever God would have you go. John picked up the audio-visual. He somehow had faith to believe that what I was saying on Sundays was worth recording. I have never figured that out. Why would anybody want to listen to this stuff? I’ve never been able to listen to myself speak. It makes me too nervous.

John got all the 17 years up on a website, GeorgeOWood.com – amazing. I confess: I never listen to it. But after Christmas I got an Ipod and I downloaded some of my Luke series. I’ve been walking and I’m listening to 20-25 years ago. Maybe I did better than I thought. John and Eileen are two of the most incredible workers in the kingdom who never sought credit. Never sought the limelight. But who have stayed consistently in the race.

I think of George and Juanita. I’ll never forget George coming into church out of the Catholic-charismatic renewal, a contractor, 6’4”, ruddy Irish cheeks. His first testimony service on a Wednesday night he stood up and said, “Before I became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, I drank a fifth of whisky a day. But since I became a Christian I’ve only had a beer a day.” Our tea-totaling congregation about fell out of their seats.

I absolutely hated to be touched. I was not a touchy-feely-huggy person. I was a lot like my dad who didn’t hold hands with his own wife. Why would you join hands in a service with a perfect stranger? I’d be standing at the door after the service and the congregation would be filing out and I’d be shaking hands with people and George would come along. He wouldn’t shake my hand. He’d put his arms around me, hug me, lift me off the ground and say, “Pastor, that was the most wonderful service I’ve ever heard!” and I’m saying, “Put me down! I don’t want to be hugged!” But I owe whatever warmth I have in my life to a great extent to the example of George and Juanita that showed me that love is not only with words but also with deeds. I could always count on them to be around people who are in great need. I’ll never forget a testimony that George gave and said, “Since I have been saved and been baptized in the Spirit, I love things I never liked before. Such as sick people and the elderly. When you touch people and say, ‘I love you,’ you are loving Jesus.” They encourage me to stay in the race of life.

I think of Jim and Cora. Cora fought MS for over 15 years. Finally in February of 2001 went to be with Jesus. In one of her last notes to Jim who today is serving, teaching in a school for missionary children in the Philippines. She could no longer talk. She was totally bedfast and in terrible physical condition. She writes a note to Jim: “I’m holding my gullet closed to keep the acid down, can’t talk, stayed up, prayed a lot. Dreamed of doing things with you and Jen. I thought Jesus would come tonight so don’t know how I’ll deal with pain today. I love you. Had a happy night. Can you believe that? I feel so alive, how can I be dying? Hurry, Jesus!” A note

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in the corner of her pad said, "I want to take a bath and have a root-beer float." She couldn't. The last thing she said to her husband, "Did you know I love you. You're dying (to hug and kiss you) wife." Signed it "Sleepless in Huntington Beach." She left a powerful example of faith. She stayed in the race until the end. She had a purple dress she hung in her closet that if she were healed she wanted to wear. I'm sure there's a facsimile of it that is even more glorious on the other side.

I think of Mark and Jane. Jane had been severely injured in an automobile accident when she was 17 and confined to a wheelchair from that age on. They were a young married couple in the church. They were not planning on ever having children because of her physical condition. But one Sunday on Mother's Day I preached a sermon on Amram and Jocabed and how the parents of Moses, Miriam and Aaron if they had said, The times are too difficult. We can't raise a child in this kind of environment. If they had said that we'd never had this incredible leadership of these siblings – Moses, Aaron, Miriam.

Somehow the Holy Spirit spoke to their heart and said, Don't be afraid to have children. So Lindsey and Mark are really the only ones I know for sure are a cause and effect relationship from a sermon. Lindsey and her husband are going to go as missionaries teaching in our seminary in the Philippines. Jane is one of the most cheerful persons I ever met in my life. Never been able to get out of the wheelchair. Has had upteen dozen surgeries. Always smiling, always joy. She and Mark have encouraged me in the race of life.

I think of Bob and Genevieve ministers to senior citizens. I was on an Israel tour one year. On the top of Massad, Bob had a heart attack. When he was being brought down on a stretcher, I leaned over to him and said, "Bob, how are you doing?" He said, "Better." Then his eyes rolled and he was gone. They immediately tried to apply CPR all the way down the mountain. We raced in an ambulance along the Dead Sea, met an ambulance of doctors coming out of Jerusalem. They gave him a shot of some kind of stimulant to quicken his heart. They put paddles on him. Nothing worked. Finally they pulled everything off saying, I'm sorry. We've done everything we could.

I'll never forget Genevieve. She just said, "Oh, sovereign Lord." Bob and Genevieve had been witnessing to my tour guide who finally came to me and said "Get those people off my back." I had gone to Bob and Genevieve and said, Don't bother her any more. And they said ok. She was with us when Bob died and heard Genevieve say, "Oh, sovereign God." Then all the way from the Dead Sea up to Galilee Genevieve was praying in other tongues. Our tour guide was so absolutely mesmerized by this display of Christian spirituality that she fell in love with Genevieve and Genevieve witnessed to her all that she wanted to.

In fact later when the tour guide came to the church here the first person she looked up was Genevieve. I learned so much about staying in the race of Christian life from these dear people. I could name so many, I'll just name one more. There's so many sitting here I'm not naming I'm embarrassed because all of you have had such an impact on me.

I think of Don and Judy. Don and I were in seminary together. I was single. He was married. He was working his way through seminary by 40 hours a week on the night shift at an ice cream factory then going to class in the daytime. When he finally finished his Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Missouri the week came for his final written comprehensive examination and on Monday when his comprehensive examination started he had a kidney stone

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attack. He was in so much pain he'd go out to the rest room, throw up, come back. I've had a kidney stone attack so I know something about it. I don't know how Don sat there but he said, If I don't take this exam now it'll be a whole other year. I can't wait another year. So he sat there all that week writing his finals while throwing up in the bathroom every few minutes in excruciating pain. He passed his written comprehensive. Got his doctorate and on Friday when he was done with his last exam he went to the hospital and had the kidney stone dealt with.

I look at him. You know he died of prostate cancer a few years ago. But to the end he was teaching. You know what he was teaching in his last class at the University? He was teaching a class on healing.

Powerful examples of staying in the race. Can we smile when we've gotten bad news about our heart? Can we hang in there when a loved one has died? Can we live with good cheer? Can we remain faithful to the Lord when our finances have taken a downturn or we've lost our job? Can we remain faithful at our post of service?

The person who touched me deeply, a young student at Evangel when I was campus pastor before I came here as pastor, was involved in a car accident and was permanently blinded. She coped with it and went on with life and became with her husband a very wonderful Assemblies of God missionary. She died of bone cancer several years ago. She wrote several months before she died this poem: "If I should quit, how could I face myself and place so many scriptures on the shelf? A quitter or a conqueror I can be and God has left the choosing up to me."

We have the saints in scripture and we have the saints we know. There are people in your life that you know that are an inspiration. They're smiling when they should be crying. They're expressing gratitude when they could be complaining. They are the people that inspire us to stay in the race of life.

That's what the writer of Hebrews notes when he says, Therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. There's the inspiration to stay in the race and there is secondly, the invitation to stay in the race.

The invitation is simply this: Let us run. The tense of the verb is in the present imperative. Keep on running. Or run and run and run. Let us run the race marked out for us. We're not running alone. It's not let me run, or let I run. It's let us run. The idea is not just to run a few laps but to run the length of the course that is laid out for us. The course that extends all the way until the time that we meet Jesus.

Paul puts it this way: "Run in such a way as to get the prize."

How shall we run? The focus is not upon speed but upon endurance. There are three things that we need from this text, this text tells us, if we are to last.

First, get rid of unnecessary things. The writer of Hebrews says, "Let us throw off everything that hinders." Get rid of unnecessary things. The idea is of the Greek runner who didn't want anything to slow him down so almost all if not all of his clothes were gone. You see that in the summer Olympics with the swimming contest and the track contests, the aerodynamic clothing, and there's almost none of it. What are they doing? It could make the difference of a hundredth of a second.

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The weight that we are to take off may not of itself be evil but if it hinders us it needs to be removed. Some say of an action, “What’s the harm of doing this? Such and such, after all, is not a sin.” Perhaps it is not a sin, but is it a weight? Something may not hinder you when you are standing around but it will hinder you if you run. So get rid of the weight of bad attitudes and self-pity and blame and unforgiveness and self-indulgence. A weight can be a false goal. It can be a poor use of time. It can be a relationship that drags you down or consumes your time. Weight can be a hobby that is run amok. A weight can be a computer that you’re spending too much time at and not enough time giving yourself to others. A weight is not so much what it is but what it does. It hinders.

And the writer of Hebrews says get rid of unnecessary things in this race of the Christian life.

Then he says get rid of unrighteous things. “Let us throw of not only everything that hinders but also the sin that so easily entangles.”

A grandfather was demonstrating to his grandson this concept of entanglement. He asked him to put his hands together and then put a string around them and then told his grandson to see if he could break the string. Of course he could. Then the grandfather took another string and tied it around a couple of times and told his grandson to break it. Three times he broke it. But after about the third time as the string kept growing in multiplication, the grandson could no longer break it. The grandfather said to the grandson, “This is what happens when you have a bad habit. It becomes so strong it becomes almost impossible if not impossible to break.”

Sin will always take you further than you want it to go. It will keep you longer than you wanted to say. And it will cost you more than you are able to pay.

So the writer of Hebrews says, Lay aside the sin.

Notice the definite article – “the” sin. Everyone has *the sin*. That one. That one that trips you up every time. Your “that one” may not be mine. But “that one” always gets you.

On the one side is your destiny and purpose and on the other side is “that one.” The writer of Hebrews is saying lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles.

Then he says as an invitation, get on with the ultimate thing. You can remove all the entanglements and still not get anywhere. You must run. The Christian life is a marathon and not a sprint. Run with perseverance.

That word “perseverance” is one of my favorite words if not my favorite word in the New Testament. It’s the Greek word *hupomena*. It’s two words. To remain or abide. God can either lift the load from you, which we call a miracle. Or he can give you strength to carry the load and that’s *hupomena*. That’s perseverance. That’s a very vital component of faith. Get on with the ultimate thing. Run with perseverance. We wish that all things could be done very quickly. I wish crises of life could be ended quickly. But it’s not a six-second race. It’s not a 100-yard dash. It’s a marathon.

Fifty-four years ago this summer on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1952, a tremendous drama unfolded off the coast of Catalina. A fog shrouded morning that July 4<sup>th</sup> when a young woman named Florence Chadwick

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waded into the water off Catalina Island. She intended to swim the channel from the island to Long Beach. Long distance swimming was not new to her. She had already swum the English Channel in both directions. But that day on July 4<sup>th</sup> in California the water was numbing cold. The fog was so thick she could scarcely see the boat. Several times sharks had to be driven away with rattle fire. She swam more than 15 hours before she finally asked to be taken out of the cold water. Her trainer tried to encourage her to swim on since the way were so close to land. But when Florence looked all she saw was fog so she quit. As it turns out only one half mile from her goal. Later she said, "I'm not excusing myself but if I could have seen the land I would have made it." It wasn't the cold or the fear or the exhaustion that caused Florence Chadwick to fail. It was the fog.

Two months after her failure on a bright sunny day, Florence Chadwick swam off the same beach into the same channel, swam the distance. Setting a speed record. She could see now the land!

Those times when the fog bank of life has rolled into our soul, when it's rolled into our family, when it's rolled into our personal situation, we long for simplistic answers and there are plenty of people to pat us on the back and give us simplistic answers. There are plenty simplistic answers even on Christian television. We wish were in a spiritual lottery where we could hit the jackpot or have a magic wand to make the physical or emotional or existential pain go away. But the text tells us that sometimes it doesn't get easier any time soon. We have to suck it up, stay in the race and get our second wind. It is precisely at such times that perseverance *hupomena* was designed by God as a grace implanted in our souls.

The late Peter Marshall who was chaplain of the United States Senate opened the Senate one day with this prayer "Our Father, when we long for life without trials and work with out difficulties remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure. With stout hearts may we see in every calamity an opportunity and not give way to the pessimists that sees in every opportunity a calamity." Oaks, diamonds and christlike character take time to form. There are few simple solutions to anything. Perseverance is a quality, which rivets us to our post when the gales of life threaten to sweep us off the deck.

Thus Paul counsels us to be patient in affliction. I have talked about some of the people who have so wonderfully run or are running the race of life. As pastor I could also tell you some heartbreaking stories of persons who ran off the track and they are no longer servicing the Lord and whose life or family life is an absolute crash motif.

If you're one of those today I don't think of life as a fork in the road in which if you make one wrong choice you can never get back. I think of it as being in a boat that's going downstream and if you wind up on the banks and get out of the boat and start walking through the forest and get lost for a while you can still find your way back to the bank, get back in the boat and get back in the river where God intended you to be all along. You may not be as far downstream as you would have been had you not beached yourself. But you can still get into the river of God's blessing.

The poet said it so well: "When things go wrong as they sometimes will, when the road you're trudging seems all uphill, when the funds are low and the debts are high, and you want to smile but you have to sigh, when care is pressing you down a bit, rest if you must but don't you quit. Life is queer with its twists and turns as every one of us sometimes learns and many a failure

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turns about when he might have won had he stuck it out. Don't give up though the pace seems slow. You may succeed with another blow. Success is failure turned inside out. The silver lining of the clouds of doubt. And you never can tell how close you are when you may be nearer though it seems so far. So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit. It's when things seem worse that you must not quit. Stay in the race."

There's the inspiration and the invitation to stay in the race. And finally there is the revelation of one who stayed in the race.

We leave behind the heavy hitters in Hebrews 11 and come to one whose faithfulness exceeds all of theirs. Thus we are not told to gaze at the heroes of chapter 11. Just glance at them if you will, just glance at them long enough. You will see their faults. You'll see that Noah got drunk. You'll see that Abraham lied. You'll see that Moses murdered. You will see that David committed adultery. And if you knew me well enough you could tick off a whole list of things about me as well. But there is one whose example of faithfulness far exceeds. "Looking unto Jesus," the writer says. The genesis and the finisher of our faith. Have a revelation of Jesus in this race of life. On the cross Jesus indicated that he had crossed the finish line. He said, "It is finished." He died at the age of 33. He did not die young. He died *finished*. He died when he had completed his mission.

Make sure in life that you finish what God has for you. The death on the cross is not a pleasant way to die but Jesus did not focus on the pain of his present. Instead he focused on the prospect of his future. As in childbearing – on the other side is the joy.

Jesus sat down when he was finished at the right hand of the majesty on high.

Whatever you need on the journey the one thing for sure that is essential is keep looking to Jesus. My mother always used to say to me, "George, do not look at people because you can spot plenty of failures in the Christian life. Don't get your eyes on people. Look to Jesus."

Of course, I've said, there are some people that inspire us. And that's all well and good. But in the last analysis it is Jesus that we look to. The idea in fixing our eyes upon Jesus to look away from everything and look to him alone. He ran the race, a race far more difficult than our own since our race does not involve the shedding of our blood. Let's not look behind us to failure or success. We don't look beside us at what others are doing. We look away from all else unto him.

For those of you for whom I have had the privilege of serving as pastor you know that most of my sermons were directed to myself. I preach to myself and you get to listen. I preach this text to myself because this year, believe it or not, I am turning 65. I will be able to draw, if I want, a social security check. I can't believe it. I still feel like I'm 16. It's not fair! I have been so privileged in life to be in such wonderful places and positions and with such great people. I must at this moment in my life avoid the temptation of looking to the past. To my failures and to my successes. Then putting my feet up in the air and saying I've done my part. But instead I must get redirected in what God has for me at this age.

You must do the same whatever your age is. We must not look as believers to fads or methods or comparisons to others. Why focus on the periphery when instead we can focus on the center, on Jesus Christ himself. The more we look to Jesus the easier it will be to lay aside every weight

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and sin that easily besets us. The most effective way to get a child to drop a dirty or a harmful object is to offer that child something better. The best way to get a tired horse to move quickly is not to use the whip. But to point him in the direction of home.

We're looking to Jesus. Where is Jesus? Is he up there in the crowd? Up there in the coliseum of Hebrews 11? Is he in a special box in the stands? On no. You cannot run a race looking sideways. He is not off to the side somewhere. He is not suspended over you because you can't run a race looking up. He is at the finish line straight ahead. Run toward him. That's where Jesus is. He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

That phrase "Sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high" and "seated at the right hand of God" has an interesting application. I first saw it as pastor when one day I was reading the account of Stephen's death, the first Christian to die. The text said that as he was dying he said, "I see the heaven open and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." I switched over to Ephesians and find that Jesus sat down at the right hand of God. How does that mesh? Jesus sat down and yet when Stephen was dying says he saw Jesus standing. A simple thought went through me! Of course! Jesus is always the perfect gentleman. When a person comes into your presence and if you're seated you stand up to greet them.

Somehow that became a picture in my mind of how Jesus meets us when we cross the finish line. He's standing there.

We had a couple in the church, Mel and Doris. They had no children. Mel had promised Doris that he would outlive her because he didn't want her to have to deal with the trauma of life after him. They were deeply in love and she was very deeply dependent upon him for a lot of things. But Mel came down with an incurable disease. He was in Hoag hospital and I was visiting him about every day. I was going down the hall one day and Doris comes out of his room tears coming down her cheeks. Mel had been in a coma for, I think, a couple of days. It was the very last stages of the illness. Doris comes out, tears in her eyes, running down her cheeks. She said, "Pastor, Mel has just come out of the coma. He is lucid. I don't know how long it's going to be. Before you go in I have to tell you what happened. When he came out of the coma he said to me, 'I want to go home today. Will you forgive me?' She said at first I thought he was talking about going to our house. I said, Oh, no. You're too sick. He said, No, I'm going home. Will you forgive me?" By that question, Will you forgive me? He was asking to be released from his promise to follow her in death rather than precede her. She said of course.

So with that knowledge I stepped into the room. We prayed for Mel's healing. For the life of me I do not understand the mystery of healing. I've seen God heal people. There are people in this sanctuary who had been wonderfully healed. Other people suffer. I stepped into the room, got down by Mel's bed and talked with him. I said, "Mel, we're going to pray again that the Lord would heal you but if he doesn't, it could be that very quickly now you're going to be in the Lord's presence." He nodded his head. I said, "I was reading in scripture how Stephen the first Christian martyr went into the Lord's presence that the Lord stood up to meet him. [Mel was to die that very day.] Mel, when you cross over, Jesus will be standing there waiting for you. He'll be there to meet you." Mel had tears, we all were in tears. I was so caught up in the moment I said probably one of the dumbest things I've ever said. I said, "And when you see him, 'Mel, would you say hello to him for me?'" He smiled and said he would. I thought, "How stupid!! I talked to Jesus this morning. Why do I have to have someone say hi to him for me?"

## **STAY THE RACE**

But Jesus, the writer of Hebrews says, is standing at the finish line. You must look to him, the author and the finisher of our faith. It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrows will erase. So bravely run the race till we see Christ.

My message to you today: stay in the race.

Our loving heavenly Father, we thank you for these wonderful brothers and sisters. We realize, Lord, that here today there may be some who are going through severe moments of stress and trial. Staying in the race is a very difficult experience for them. The enemy would like to get us distracted and to have us walk off the track. Indeed, Lord, we can all think of people who have walked off the track. With sorrow we see that. But we also have a great crowd of witnesses that inspire us. That this Christian life is doable. We have people around us who encourage us on by example and inspires us. But more than all of them, Lord, we have your example. You are cheering for us at the finish line. None of us know when that finish line will be. It could be today. It could be this year. Maybe you give some in this audience if you tarry decades yet to go. But help us Lord, to continue to steadfastly run this marathon race of the Christian life knowing that as runners in the race of life for you we are never losers. We are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. We are super winners as we stay in the race. Encourage each life here today to remain faithfully committed to you so that every purpose you have had in sending them to planet earth will be fulfilled and here will come that day when at the finish line you will say, Well done, good and faithful servant. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.