**ENDURANCE (#2)**

***The Christian’s Marathon***

I had been running races since my sophomore year in high school. I ran on the Cross Country team, which was a two mile run. I ran both the half mile and the one mile race on the track team. After high school I enjoyed running distance so much that I trained for 5k (3.1 miles) and 10k (6.2 miles) races whenever I could enter them. But when I moved to preach in Texas I saw an application for The Houston Marathon that would be run in January of 1981. Since it was on a Saturday I knew it would not interfere with my duty to preach on Sunday (hint: I was not thinking clearly). Also, I heard that Bill Rodgers was going to enter that race. He was a legend who had been both an Olympian and a four-time winner of both the Boston Marathon and the New York City Marathon. I just wanted to say I had “raced” Bill Rodgers.

Halfway through the race, run on Interstate 10 in Houston, I passed Bill Rodgers! Yes sir, I blew right by him! Of course, he was going east, back to the finish line, and I was going west, toward the turnaround at the 13.1 mile marker. He ran, and won, the 26.2 mile race in a time of 2 hours, 12 minutes, 19 seconds. I was close behind him in a time of 3 hours, 57 minutes, 57 seconds. I came in a close 2,579th out of about 4,500 runners. I was so proud when I sprinted past that 60-year old grandpa at the finish line! The next morning, Sunday, I could barely get out of bed, and had to shuffle up to the pulpit and hold on to the podium to preach. It was the shortest sermon of my life! (I know what you’re thinking – I’ll bet many of you wish I was still running marathons!).

Six weeks later I somehow got the hair-brained idea to run another marathon in Houston. I was hooked. When I moved to Minnesota I entered the famous Grandma’s Marathon in Duluth. It was in that race that I learned what “The Wall” really means. At the 19 mile mark my legs seized up and I collapsed to the pavement. Orville Vaughn, running with me, stopped to help me up and encourage me to keep going. He walked with me, then we shuffled together, then jogged, then finally I got my second wind and we crossed the finish line together at the historic lift bridge in downtown Duluth.

I say all of that to say this. I “get” what the Hebrews writer is saying when he speaks of running a race of endurance as a metaphor of the Christian’s life. In Hebrews 12:1-3 the author says:

​1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us ***run with******endurance*** *the race that is set before us*, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

Pheidippides had no idea what he was starting when he was chosen by the Greek commander Miltiades to run from the battlefield back to the city of Athens, about 25 miles away, to tell them that the army had defeated the far superior Persians in 490 B.C.. He ran the entire way, running into the forum and announcing “Nike!” (i.e. Victory), then collapsing and dying on the spot. When the modern Olympic Games were revived in 1896 in Athens, the reenactment of Pheidippides run was named the Marathon. (Note: In America the famous Boston Marathon began the very next year in 1897).

The Hebrews author probably had this race in mind 500 years later when he said that the Christian’s race was one of endurance, not a sprint. Becoming a disciple of Christ requires us to think of a long-term commitment, like a marriage, not a short term involvement, like a family vacation. Sadly, far too many get caught up in the emotion of the moment, “committing” their life to Christ in order to be forgiven, while failing to count the cost of their confession. They sprint out of the starting block and quickly run out of wind, not realizing Jesus called them to “*run with endurance the race set before us*.”

Think of the apostle Paul. When he obeyed Ananias’ command to “*arise and be baptized and wash away your sins*” (Ac. 22:16), he made a commitment for life. He even said, “*I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God*…” (Gal. 2:20). Thirty years later, after a life of suffering, he could finally say, “*the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*” (2 Tim. 4:7). Exhausted, like Pheidippides, he could announce “NIKE!” and then die.

Jesus never pulled His punches when announcing potential membership in His new kingdom. He swung with full force, stating in hard-to-believe terms the conditions of becoming a disciple. He said in plain language, “*whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it”* (Lk. 14:27-28). Like marriage, don’t start if you have no intention of finishing your commitment. He doesn’t want quitters in His service.

No runner knows fully what he or she is getting into when they sign on to run a marathon, unable to see the obstacles over the next 26.2 miles (cramps, dehydration, blisters, heatstroke, etc). Trust me, only those committed to endure, no matter what, will actually cross the finish line. The same holds true for the far more important race of your life. The Christian, when he arises to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-5), can never know the obstacles Satan will put in his way over the next 10, 20, 30, 40, or 50 years (family pressure, sinful pleasure, false doctrines, apathy, etc). Like the Lord’s parable of the sower told us, there will be those who fail to count the cost and will either quickly burn out (“the rocky soil”) or fade away (“the thorny soil”) – Matt. 13:20-22.

Those who “*endure to the end*” will receive the victor’s crown. And, unlike my race with Bill Rodgers long ago, all of us will be able to cry out “NIKE!” as Christ places the wreath of victory on our heads. That’s one marathon I intend to win. Let’s run together. – Rick