

Running in the Special Olympics
Hebrews 12: 1-12
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Please join me in prayer: O Lord, open my mouth that my lips may proclaim Thy praise. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Someone with excellent written and oral communication skills wrote the book of Hebrews. It begins poetically, alliteratively, and one can only get a sense of its eloquence by reading it in Greek...

Polymeros kai polytropos palai Theos lalysas tois patrasin en nmerwn prophytas. A close English translation would be “In many places in many patterns in the past God has proclaimed to our parents and the patriarchs by the prophets”...you get the idea.

Some speculate the orator Apollos wrote the book of Hebrews. Some believe a poet like Robert Barrett Browning or Elizabeth Barrett Browning authored this book. The Book of Hebrews addresses a Jewish congregation, hence its title. It focuses on the theological confusion early believers had as they tried to understand exactly who Jesus was and what he meant for them. This particular congregation elevated the role of angels and some believed Jesus was an angel. The writer of Hebrews explained that Jesus was no angel. He was and is one with God; the angels worship *him*.

The book is decidedly Christological: it proclaims the Good News about Jesus Christ. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, he is our great high priest, and we will never need another, he is our God. He has spoken in the past, he speaks to us in the present, and he will continue to speak to us in the future. We are taught that we are partners in his ministry, and that we continue a long tradition of those who lived by faith, with Jesus himself as our primary example.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.” It then reads as a roll call of all the faithful beginning with Abraham. By faith, each one claimed God’s promises and did as God commanded.

Then the twelfth chapter of Hebrews crescendos with “*therefore*, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, all the faithful of all times and places, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The imagery is that of a

great sports stadium—filled to capacity and beyond with those who have gone before us, who are depending on us, praying for us, waving banners for us, cheering for us, as we complete our leg of the race.

Harvard Divinity School's Peter Gomes has made the point that “the saints now gone depend in some measure on us to continue, if not to finish, that for which they lived and died. Not only do we depend on them and draw inspiration from them, but they depend on us;...we cannot rest on their laurels, just as they cannot rest on ours...”

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Peter, James and John, the Apostle Paul, Mary and Martha—they are all depending on the likes of you and me and without us taking the torch of faith from them and continuing to run with it and pass it on to the next generation, their story is incomplete.

J. Harry Cotton once said, “As long as a person is standing still, whatever weights there are will seem harmless and innocent. But let that person run in earnest, and the excess baggage will soon have to be thrown aside.” The race of faith God sets before us is a serious one that will require all we are and all we have to give. Our sinful thoughts, our negative feelings, and our self-destructive habits will all have to be set aside to stay in the race. We all know what our personal baggage is and the nature of those things that cling to us like saran wrap on fly paper. We know the baggage we need to jettison to run the race with perseverance.

I was on a swim team while I was in college. Do you know that swimmers have certain rituals they go through before any big meet, to make sure they are getting rid of anything that could slow them down in the water. The first couple of months of training, no one would shave any part of their body. We would swim for two hours a day everyday. Then, just before our first big meet, we would all-male and female, shave our legs, our arms, the guys would shave their chests and backs and sometimes even their heads, and we would grease our bodies so we would glide through the water with no resistance whatsoever. I really don't know how much shaving helped us swim faster, but the ritual of getting rid of anything that could slow us down was important psychologically.

We are told to run with perseverance, to endure, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We are reminded of what he went through, that for the joy set before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and that he is now seated at the right hand of God. Remember, the cross was a cruel instrument of capital punishment. It was usually reserved for heinous crimes. Jesus did not die of natural causes. He did not die in a boating accident. He died

the kind of death definitive of shame: he was executed as a criminal and treated as a menace to society. Shame is the most debilitating of human experiences. When we feel ashamed, it is because we are being publicly exposed for something we have done that is terribly wrong. To feel ashamed is to feel naked, embarrassed, publicly humiliated and judged. It is even worse to have people say “shame on you” when it is undeserved. We live in a world where people project their sins onto others and create scapegoats. Jesus did not deserve a shameful death, but even common criminals jeered at him as he died on the cross. The leaders of his faith taunted him and the crowds mocked him.

Jesus disregarded the shame for the joy that was set before him. He remained faithful and obedient for the sake of saving us and restoring us to a right relationship with God.

The writer of Hebrews now reminds us of the importance of enduring trials for the sake of discipline. All children who are loved are disciplined. We are children of God so he disciplines us. All discipline is painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

In the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Finland, an American athlete named Ashenfelder made history. Ashenfelder, while not a particularly outstanding athlete, was a young man blessed in spades with moxie and self-discipline. He carefully planned his career by perusing Olympic record books. He discovered that America was weakest in the Olympic track and field event called the Steeplechase. No American had ever won that race.

Ashenfelder set out to become a steeplechaser. He was the last American to qualify for the Olympic team in that event. No one expected anything from him at the Olympic games. The day before the race he told some of his friends that he was going to turn this into his moment of glory. How? By bursting into the lead at the beginning of the race and setting a pace for the first two or three laps. He said, “Since no one ever remembers who finishes second or third, I will be remembered as the man who led at the beginning of the race.”

The day of the race dawned. It was approaching the time for the Steeplechase event. Twenty-five or so of Ashenfelder’s teammates were playing cards in the American dorm, and remembering his boast, they decided to see if Ashenfelder’s plan would work.

The starter’s gun sounded and true to his prediction, Ashenfelder jumped to the lead. For the first part of the race he ran toe to toe with a Russian who was favored to win the event. As he came down the homestretch during one of those

early laps, his teammates, lining the track, began to chant, “Ashenfelder, Ashenfelder, Ashenfelder!” With each lap the chant grew from 25 American athletes to 50,000 to 75,000 spectators in the stands. People began to check their program to see who this American was who was managing to keep up with the favored Russian. The chorus grew because the Fins had no love for the Russians. As the great cloud of witnesses encouragement grew louder, Ashenfelder’s confidence strengthened and his body responded with stamina and determination. As the runners entered the last lap of the race, more than 100,000 voices were cheering him on. On the last lap, the American took the lead and to the shock of everyone, including himself, the American named Ashenfelder became the Olympic gold medallist in the Steeplechase.

We love stories like this, but we may have a hard time relating to them. Sometimes despite our desire to run the race of faith with perseverance, we have very real obstacles and limitations that stand in our way. At the end of our passage, we are told to lift our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees. We are told to make straight paths for our feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather healed.

According to Tom Long, God’s race is not always the Olympics, it is more often the Special Olympics. By the power of Christ, weary, discouraged, and somewhat out-of-shape Christians are encouraged nevertheless to “lift drooping hands and strengthen weak knees.”

I read the twelfth chapter of Hebrews and I begin to hear the music of *Chariots of Fire*. I feel inspired to run the race of faith. And yet my running days are over. I have planter fasciatis in both my feet, and I have to wear custom made orthotics in my shoes to have proper arch support and reduce inflammation. The other day I was walking along the beach here in Lake Forest, and soon a group of beautifully fit people came running by, passing me like I was standing still. I have to admit I didn’t like being passed by those strong, beautifully fit runners. But then came another wave of runners, not quite as toned and fit, and then came the walkers, like me. We are all in this race of faith together, whatever our age, our level of fitness, and our ability.

I also noticed there was a group of people sitting around picnic tables, and I realized it was an AA group. They were not walking or running, but they were nevertheless in the race of their lives, a race to attain and maintain sobriety. As I walked past them, I prayed for their continued recovery. I also noticed the Mexican garbage man, who has to discipline himself to go to work everyday to pick up other people’s trash. I began to think about all the discipline each of us

must submit to every day to clean and organize our households, to complete our projects at work, to continue to study to attain a new skill. It takes faith and discipline for a research scientist at Abbot to go to work every day trying to make better drugs for people. It takes faith and discipline for a surgeon to perform live threatening procedures with great skill. It takes faith and discipline for a teacher to prepare lessons so her students will learn. It takes faith and discipline for an investment banker to manage other people's money. It takes faith and discipline for your pastor, Christine Chakoian, to prepare a sermon to inspire the people of God each week, and for your other pastors and staff to prepare to lead and teach and serve. As you know, the list goes on and on. But as I walked on the beach thinking about our various disciplines and the obstacles and limitations we face each day as we submit to these disciplines, I realized that our race of faith is indeed, at least on most days, more like the Special Olympics than the Olympics.

Chances are you don't remember Bob Ireland. Bob was a participant in the New York City marathon in 1986; to the best of my knowledge he still holds the record for the slowest time of anyone ever to finish the race. In 1986, he finished in 19,413th place. He finished last, but he finished. His time was 4 days, 2 hours, 17 seconds; which is remarkable when you consider that Bob Ireland lost both his legs during the Vietnam War. He completed the entire marathon with his arms, pushing his wheelchair.

Once an old blacksmith, who had had a great deal of trouble in his life, was asked how he could endure and how he could still believe in a loving God. He explained, "When I pick up a piece of metal, in order to make it something useful, I must first put it into the fire. And when it is hot, red hot, I take it out and I begin to hammer on it until it is useful. Unless I put it into the fire and hammer it into shape, it is worthy only of the scrap heap. I know God loves me because he continues to put me in the fire and hammer me into a shape that is useful. He does not simply throw me out into the scrap heap."

Last week we celebrated the fourth of July, and we had quite a celebration. I moved here from Philadelphia. As you know people come from all over the nation and all over the world to see where the Continental Congress met and to see our Liberty Bell. Our Liberty Bell is unique because it is cracked. Our symbol of freedom and liberty is imperfect. When it was put to work, to ring out justice and liberty for all, it cracked, and it has never made a proper sound since. It seems to me that this imperfect symbol of our freedom and liberty is very apt for two reasons. First, it is a warning of what will happen to us if we are not

properly fired and hammered, if we refuse to submit to God's discipline, as individuals and as a nation. To become all our forebears hoped this nation would be, we must continue to submit to the discipline necessary to create freedom and justice for all. Second, our cracked Liberty Bell is an apt symbol for America because we are imperfect people living imperfect lives who nevertheless are always striving to create a society where freedom, justice, and liberty *can ring out*.

Years ago, the Rev. Robert Cleveland Holland preached a sermon at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh in which he said, "We Christians make one mistake all the time. We believe that God is on our side, and therefore, with God's help, we ought to be able to solve, today or tomorrow at the latest, problems that have been hundreds of years in the making. We read the biographies of the victorious, the overcomers, and we come away with the impression that they single-handedly remade the world in a shorter week than the original six days God took. The truth is that even Luther and Calvin and Knox and Wilberforce and Wesley and Fox and Lincoln and anyone who ever did anything—everyone of them were just tiny parts of an endlessly long and complex process that God uses to advance His eternal purpose. They responded to the Lord where they were, and God transformed their little defeats into His great successful war. If we were not infected with so much of the American success virus, we would look at our lives, at our service to Jesus Christ, and we would say, 'I will do what I can, and maybe someone will join me; and maybe someday my children's children will finally see a change for the better in this tiny corner of the world where I tried as best I could—and I'm not sure of success, but I leave that in God's hands.'"

So run the race God has set before you and keep your eyes on Jesus.

May you run with perseverance.

May you carry the torch.

May you finish the race. *Amen.*