

## Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Since I am between preaching series, I'm going to take a pastor's prerogative and preach a message from one of my favorite passages. Hebrews 12:1-2.

It's no coincidence that this passage has something to do with running. Almost two weeks ago I ran in the 120<sup>th</sup> Boston marathon. It was my second time running Boston having done it 16 years ago in the year 2000.

As some of you know I set out to get back to Boston about five years ago. You have to run a qualifying time at another certified marathon race in order to be considered to run the Boston marathon.

It took me five marathons to run a qualifying time. When I finally got my acceptance notice last in October I was as elated as a college freshman who got into the university of their dreams.

However I had some health issues last year that took me away from running for over three months. When I finally got back on the road, I did too much too soon, and injured my knee.

That knee injury has taken forever to heal, which prevented me from training. So I showed up in Boston happy to be there but not prepared to do anything of a competitive nature.

This morning I'm going to use my experience in Boston as an analogy for the truths that we find in the first two verses of Hebrews 12.

I don't often do this in my preaching but I'm going to ask for your indulgence this morning. The title for today's sermon is Run the Good Race.

I'll divide up the message into three parts. The start of the race. The race itself. The finish line.

Hebrews 12 starts with the word “Therefore”. That simple adverb is essential to understanding this passage. It points you to everything that led to where you are now.

That’s why we normally preach through entire books of the Bible chapter by chapter. The “therefore’ s” in the Bible point you to all that preceded that passage.

In Hebrews 12, the word “therefore” connects the previous 11 chapters to what is being presented in this chapter. This entire epistle is written to encourage Jewish believers to persevere in Christ. “Therefore...

- Since Jesus is superior to angels, Moses, the Law and the prophets
- Since we are able to draw near to God by the blood of Christ,
- Since He is our great High Priest who not only sacrificed Himself but lives to intercede for us now

Therefore run the good race set before you. Where you are now is not a result of random chance. Where you are going in life is not a haphazard course that could end up anywhere. You are to run the race set before you.

When you line up at the start line of any marathon, particularly the Boston marathon, there is nothing random or haphazard about what it took to get you there.

Nobody woke up that morning and said, “Hey, I think I’ll go out and run a marathon.”

There were 30,000 runners who lined up at the starting line on April 18. Every runner had their own story to tell in how they got there.

The elite runners were primarily from Kenya and Ethiopia. Most of them run to support their families back home. In some cases a runner will be financially supporting their entire village.

Some runners were there to fulfill a lifelong dream. Others like Mark Bauman from Flint were continuing a long standing tradition. Mark finished his 47<sup>th</sup> consecutive Boston marathon.

The “therefore” in your life is what brought you to the starting line. The start of a career, the start of a marriage, the start of new phase in your life.

What preceded that new beginning is the story of God’s covenantal faithfulness. He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.

**Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)**

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD,  
"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you  
hope and a future."

We like to think that we’re the captain of our ship; we’re the masters of our fate. It’s up to us to set the course of our lives.

There is of course some truth in that. We are not to sit around and wait for life to happen.

But as you start any new venture; as you begin each new day, it’s important to be aware that there’s more going on than what’s on your agenda.

God has brought you to this point. The circumstances and the back story of your life fits into a bigger plan and a larger narrative.

In Boston they send you out in waves. As you line up the starting line is nowhere in sight. I was in the third of four waves. You have to walk about a mile from the holding area to the starting corrals.

You get to talking with people as you’re waiting around. Everybody is excited and ready to get on with the race. The biggest difference I noticed from the last time I ran Boston in 2000 was the influence of smart phones with the runners.

People were talking not only with the other runners but many were carrying on facetime conversations with family and friends back home. Some of that was delightful as you heard little children rooting for their moms or dads.

But the runners taking selfies were a bit much. They were oblivious to everyone around them. They seemed only interested in recording this important moment of personal history.

We live in a day and age where more and more people are almost encouraged to be self-absorbed.

Technology has made us more like the Greek mythology figure Narcissus who fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water.

We love our selfies; we tweet our thoughts; we post the most trivial incidents of everyday life. These things are not necessarily bad or harmful; but we live in a “it’s all about me” culture.

As you line up for the start of anything, be mindful of those around you. Remember all of the events and the people who have helped you in your past to bring you to this point.

And know that your story fits into a bigger story. In chapter 11 of Hebrews that precedes our passage today, you have the story of one person after another who played a part in God’s redemptive plans for the advancement of His Kingdom.

Your life fits in that larger narrative. The plans that you have for yourself may have to be adjusted as you begin your race.

**Isaiah 55:8-9 (ESV)**

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.<sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The start of the race is when energy levels and expectations are high and the visions of grandeur run even higher. But that didn’t last long for me in Boston.

I could tell right from the beginning that my knee was the weak link that I’d have to answer to sooner or later. I began at a very deliberate and moderate pace, but by mile 10 the knee ache became more intense.

I had to make an adjustment. I could either try to maintain my pace with quite a bit of discomfort, or I needed to finish the next 16 miles in a jog/walk fashion.

I also had the option of dropping out, but that wasn't going to happen. I already knew that I wasn't going to have a great finishing time even under the best of circumstances.

In fact I knew it wasn't going to be a good day when the Elvis impersonator passed me by.

So at that point, with still more than half the race to go, my mindset changed. I had only one goal, and that was to finish the race, no matter how long it took.

That was disappointing, but on the other hand, I was free to enjoy the moment. It was a beautiful day; a bit warm for running standards, but a perfect day to be out on more leisurely stroll.

The crowds were wonderful. They cheered us on and seemed to give even more encouragement to those of us who were struggling. We were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

And when you're separated from the more competitive racers, your fellow runners are more friendly and talkative.

Usually when I'm running a marathon, I'm so focused on my pace that I miss so much of what's around me. When I wasn't chatting, I had time to think.

### **Hebrews 12:1 (ESV)**

**<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,**

It was a bad knee that was holding me back, but in life there is no greater burden that will weigh you down more than sin.

Sin is not just an action that's wrong, it's a mindset that is rebelling against God.

Our catechism says that sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the Law of God.

There is outward flagrant sin and there are inward sinful thoughts and desires. There are overt sinful actions and secret or hidden sins of the heart.

They weigh you down. They cling closely to your soul. They prevent you from experiencing the fullness of life.

If you have a bad knee in a marathon, your weak link will make itself known. Besetting sins are not so obvious. They lurk in the shadows, they disguise themselves. Sin can be subtle and hidden from sight.

If you are to run the good race set before you, you must become aware of what your besetting sins are. Is it pride, is it anger, is it greed, is it the need to always be in control?

As we partake of the LORD'S Supper today, this is a time for self-examination.

#### **1 Corinthians 11:27-29 (ESV)**

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

#### **Psalm 139:23-24 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! <sup>24</sup> And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

#### **2 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV)**

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

What is failing the test? It's not trusting in Christ. It's thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. It's focusing on the faults of others and making excuses for your own faults. It's thinking that you know better what's best for you than God does. When you truly examine yourself in the light of God's Word, it's painful.

Between miles 21 & 22 in Boston there's a series of hills that ends with what is known as heartbreak hill. The name speaks for itself.

Many a runner have had their hearts and stamina broken on that infamous hill. If you're going to get a muscle cramp, you'll get it on heartbreak hill.

It was a breeze for me because I walked it. I wasn't going to kill myself. On that day I knew my limits. Ironically it was the only part of the race where I actually passed people. There were more than a dozen of runners off to the side doubled over in pain.

What's the lesson I learned from that? When you walk by faith, just keep going. You're not going to break any records, but who cares? Just keep on course.

When I passed one of the medical stations a worker there asked me if I was okay. I said "sure."

He called me over and said, "Come here." He put a cold wet towel on my back, rubbed my neck & shoulders and said, "A year from now, nobody's going to ask you what your time was. Go finish the race."

I needed that. Keep going toward the finish line, and don't worry about what your time or place is going to be.

### **Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV)**

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

There is nothing sweeter for a runner than your first glimpse of the finish line. In Boston it's on Boylston Street. It's where the bombings took place in 2013.

Security was tight. The crowd was big and enthusiastic. The runners that I came in with were in the back of the pack, but you'd never see more joy as they crossed the finish line.

We weren't fast. We didn't place well in our respective divisions. The real winners had come in hours before any of us did. But we had finished the race.

### **2 Timothy 4:7**

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,  
I have kept the faith.

This year's Boston was my 13<sup>th</sup> marathon. It was by far the slowest race I had ever run. But that didn't seem to matter when they put the medal around your neck. There's no shame if you made it to the end.

As you run the race set before you, look to JESUS, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

JESUS was not ashamed to identify with us in our weakness. He endured the pain and humiliation of the cross. When His work on the cross was done, He said, "It is finished."

The Bible says that JESUS is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Because of Christ everything that you endure will be worth it in the end. He is the prize at the end of the race.

### **1 Corinthians 9:24-25 (ESV)**

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. <sup>25</sup> Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

The metaphor of running in the Bible points us to a greater spiritual truth that every one of us needs to deal with. Don't give up. Don't go back. Run in such a way as to win the prize.

Are you running the race that is set out for you? When you approach the finish line, will you be able to say along with those believers who preceded us:

### **2 Timothy 4:7**

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,  
I have kept the faith.

In Reformed circles, we like to emphasize that we love God because He first loved us. On our own we're not running toward God, we're running away from Him.

By nature we are not seekers of the true and living God of the Bible, we are idolaters who seek to make our own deities that we control.

God is the One who seeks after His own. We didn't choose Him, He choose us. Because salvation and redemption is a work of God, He who began a good work within you, will bring it to completion.

Today I'm not going to urge you to lace up your running shoes and go out a run a 10k for JESUS.

But I am going to urge you to put your focus upon JESUS, the founder and perfecter of your faith. Run the race; live the life that He has set before you.

I'll close with this; the Greek word for race is where we get our word agony from.

It's a struggle to finish well, even to finish at all. You need a strength that you didn't even know that you had. That's endurance. That's stamina. That's perseverance. That's why we look to JESUS.

#### **Isaiah 40:28-31 (ESV)**

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. <sup>29</sup> He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. <sup>30</sup> Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; <sup>31</sup> but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.