

Things to Know About the Christian Race

One of the regular issues we have to face as Christians is the importance of spiritual endurance. Both John, Paul, and Peter wrote to the early churches about the immanent return of Christ. *Immanent*, meaning that Christ's return was "knocking at the door." In spite of that, Peter especially wrote that we would have to have a sense of patience. He warned that there would be those who would accuse us of "crying wolf."

2Pet 3:3-4 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts,

4And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as *they were* from the beginning of the creation.

Peter then said that we had to have a sense of endurance.

2Pet 3:8-9 But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day *is* with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

9The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Keeping the proper perspective about God's sense of time that a thousand years is as a day to God should be taken as a reminder that God, in His longsuffering, is gracious to enable as many to get saved as possible.

Then Peter called for us to strike a balance between *hasting* toward that day and being *diligent* and *longsuffering*.

2Pet 3:11-12,14,15 *Seeing* then *that* all these things shall be dissolved, what manner *of*

persons ought ye to be in *all* holy conversation and godliness,

12 Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?

14 Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless.

15 And account *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you;

Out of all of this, we should get the sense that since we have been looking for the immanence of the Lord for about 2000 years that we need to be reminded about "hanging in there."

The thought of the return of Christ is exciting, but we have to be ready at the same time for the long haul. Sometimes Paul uses athletics as to illustrate spiritual lessons. In Hebrews 12, he speaks of Christian life in terms of a race that is set before us.

Heb 12:1-3 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

People will say, "Oh, of course. I know that I have to run with patience," but *their* idea of not being hasty and

running with patience is almost always shorter than what is really needed. The Christian life is a race, but we have to look at like a marathon, not a sprint.

I was not the slowest runner when I was a kid, I was only about average. And then, in an eighth grade gym class exercise, I discovered that although I was not going to win in a sprint, I could outlast nearly everyone else running. My event was going to be the mile or cross country. There was a certain attitude, strategy, and training as a long distance runner that you also need in Christian life as it is described in Heb 12:1-3.

1. So great a cloud of witnesses

The first thing that we see about running the Christian race is that there was a great cloud of witnesses. Some people mistakenly think that we are being watched by the angels in heaven, or perhaps our loved ones who have gone there before us. The great cloud of witnesses is a reference to the saints back in chapter 11. Being a witness means that their life is a testimony to us of God's power. Similar to our cross country race, you don't run with the encouragement of cheerleaders along the way. You don't even have the benefits of seeing other runners. Often the closest runners are either far ahead of you or far behind you. The person you are running against is yourself. You are competing against your mind and your body. You are not so worried about beating the next person, but overcoming yourself. That does *not* mean you don't have the benefit of a "witness."

Common wisdom and scientific knowledge perceived running a mile in less than four minutes mile to be an insurmountable feat until Sir Roger Bannister set a world record time of 3 min 59.4 sec in 1954. As long distance high school runners, we knew that such a time was going to be beyond *us*, but we took Bannister as an inspiration that the limits of endurance could be pushed. Since then, a new world record has been set 18 times, the current record of 3:43.13 was set in 1999.

With the testimony of the saints who have gone on before us, we know that we can spiritually push our limits.

2. Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us

The next thing Paul challenges us with is to get rid of our excess baggage. When training, we might wear ankle weights sometimes. We did this so that when we would run the race and took the weights off we would feel lighter and stronger. Our weight workout was not done too build up big muscles but long muscles. We didn't wear street shoes, but special shoes for running long distance. You will never see a cross country runner in an overcoat and galoshes. But Paul goes further. He speaks of getting rid of the *sin* that drags us down. So many people are beset by all kinds of distractions, many of which are sinful and many are fleshly. Our concern should be one of focusing on the race.

Phil 3:14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Anything we put before God is an idol. Television, entertainment, the computer, smoking, drinking, expensive distractions that we think will satisfy, pampering self

3. Run with patience

Paul challenged us to run with patience. *Patience* speaks of *endurance*. This is really the main challenge that we face. When you were on a cross country course, one moment you are running up hill, then down hill. You are running across rocky ground and then possibly across a stream. One moment you are in the sun, and then in the shade. Each part of the course requires a different kind of pace and stride. All the time you are monitoring your breathing and marking time as you run. an be pushed, but the key word is *endurance*. We are going to face many different kinds of terrains as we run the Christian race and when you

come up against the hill that is known as "The Wall," you have to face it with patience. With endurance you put one foot in front of the other as you face each spiritual challenge. When you fall, you get back up again. You don't have anyone cheering you on on the cross country course, but you have to run the Christian race also often without anyone cheering you on. You have to outlast the hard moments. Being in the race for the long haul requires patience. Then, you can say with the apostle Paul,

2Tim 4:7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished *my* course, I have kept the faith:

Remember, it's a marathon, not a sprint.

4. The race that is set before us

Paul then points out that the race is set before us. The race is really not optional. It is placed before us and we are told to run. Unfortunately, there are those who just stand still. The race will be over at some point, but that doesn't mean that they got out of having to be part of the race. People bristle over the idea of having an obligation expected of them, but if we saw someone drowning and were called on to run to get a life line to them, would we cross our arms and not budge because we can't be pushed to do anything?

5. Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith

We saw before that we have the benefit of the testimony of the saints, but even more than that we have Jesus as our inspiration. Jesus told us that we would do even greater works because He is the author and finisher of our faith.

John 14:12-14 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater *works* than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.

13And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

14If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do *it*.

The 1936 Olympics provides a story of God working through our life for His glory.

When African-American athlete Jesse Owens arrived at the 1936 Olympic Games, he was under immense pressure. At 22, Owens had broken world records even before making his first Olympic appearance in Germany and the world was eager to catch a glimpse of him.

The atmosphere Owens was competing in was also tough and intimidating, to say the least. The 1936 Olympic Games were part of Adolf Hitler's grand plan to prove Aryan superiority and African-American's were not high on his priority list.

Despite those adversities and challenges present at the Berlin Games, Owens went on to script history on the world stage. He finished the 1936 Games with four Olympic gold medals in 100m, 200m, 4x100m relay and long jump respectively – a feat no other Olympian had ever achieved. It was a record that stood for 48 years before being broken by compatriot Carl Lewis at the 1984 Olympics.

His staggering tally of four medals at the 1936 Games was a fitting response to Hitler and shattered his idea of using the event as propaganda for the Nazi regime.

While Owens' feat was unique, he might have lost one of his gold medals had it not been for the advice from an unlikely ally – German long jumper Luz Long.

Long, who later became a

German soldier in the second World War, was tall, blond and blue-eyed – the perfect Aryan attributes according to the Nazi party but it was his friendship with Owens that became a major talking point at the Olympic Games.

...Before eventually clinching his medal in the long jump event, Owens was struggling despite being a world-record holder in that discipline. He needed a distance of 23-and-a-half-feet to qualify for the final. [Each jumper had three attempts in order to qualify for the competition. Owens thought he was doing a practice jump but had not realized the judges had begun the qualifications. His practice jump counted as a failed trial jump.] Discouraged, Owens fouled his next attempt too [by going past the jump line], leaving him with only one final chance to qualify for the final. It was at this crucial juncture that Long walked up to the American.

In what was a fine display of sportsmanship in front of the Berlin crowd, the German suggested Owens change his [jumping mark to take off well before the foul line in order to avoid overstepping] it and [ruining] the last attempt.

Heeding Long's advice, Owens sprinted on his final try and leaped into the air a foot before the foul line. The American jumped a distance of 25 feet on his final try to qualify for the final, alongside Long.

As it turned out, Owens bagged the gold, setting a new Olympic record while Long grabbed silver. The crowd in Berlin, including Hitler, [were likely] disappointed by what they saw, but Long wasn't. The German was the first to congratulate Owens and later walked around the stadium,

arm-in-arm with Owens. The duo even posed together for pictures. It was a classy act of sportsmanship that stayed with Owens for the rest of his life.

“It took a lot of courage for him to befriend me. You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn’t be a plating on the 24-karat friendship I felt for Luz Long at that moment. Hitler must have gone crazy watching us embrace,” the American had said.

Owens and Long stayed connected even after the Games. Long lost his life during the Battle of St Pietro later in 1943 but he wrote a touching letter to Owens before he died.

Here’s the transcript of the last letter to Owens by Long:

I am here, Jesse, where it seems there is only the dry sand and the wet blood. I do not fear so much for myself, my friend Jesse, I fear for my woman who is home, and my young son Karl, who has never really known his father.

My heart tells me, if I be honest with you, that this is the last letter I shall ever write. If it is so, I ask you something. It is something so very important to me. It is you go to Germany when this war is done, someday find my Karl, and tell him about his father. Tell him, Jesse, what times were like when we were not separated by war. I am saying – tell him how things can be between men on this earth.

If you do this something for me, this thing that I need the most to know will be done, I do something for you, now. I tell you something I know you want to hear. And it is true.

That hour in Berlin when I first spoke to you, when you had your knee upon the ground, I

knew that you were in prayer.

Then I not know how I know.
Now I do. I know it is never by chance that we come together. I come to you that hour in 1936 for purpose more than der Berliner Olympiade.

And you, I believe, will read this letter, while it should not be possible to reach you ever, for purpose more even than our friendship.

I believe this shall come about because I think now that God will make it come about. This is what I have to tell you, Jesse.

I think I might believe in God.

And I pray to him that, even while it should not be possible for this to reach you ever, these words I write will still be read by you.

Your brother, Luz

Jesse Owens *did* get to see Karl Long. As touching as that story is, it is even more wonderful because of the faith in God it brought about. We have each other to bring each other forward, but remember that it is all for Jesus who loved us and died for us and for *His* glory. As the author and finisher of our faith, Jesus brings us into family of God and He is there to help us on to finish our course.

Gal 6:8-9 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

9And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace

of God.

2Pet 3:3-15, Heb 12:1-3

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5. Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith John 14:12-14, Gal 6:8-9, Acts 20:24