

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE MIND: FACING THE MONSTERS THAT COME CALLING DAY AND NIGHT

Chapter 10

When the finish line approaches: Running hard to finish strong

(Revised 8/26/05)

I am not a runner. Runners are fast.

Runners are people like Asafa Powell of Jamaica who set the World Record for the 100 meters in 9.77 seconds.¹ In the amount of time it takes me to say that sentence, he can run that distance. Runners are people like Hicham el-Guerrouj of Morocco who holds the World Record for the mile in 3:43:13.² Runners are people like Ichiro Suzuki of the Seattle Mariners who can go from home to first in 3.7 seconds and from second to third base on a triple in 3.43 seconds.³

When I was in high school, I was on the tennis team, which was a spring sport in our conference. One fall, some of my friends talked me into going out for the cross-country team, as a way of getting in shape for tennis. They did not tell me you had to run two miles—every day.

As it turned out, I was the slowest man on our team. When I ran, they did not use a stop watch. They didn't even use a sundial. A calendar was that was required to measure my speed. In the nine races I competed in, I did not finish three races, I finished dead last in three races, and then my personal best, I finished second to last in three races.

I hated running so much that I didn't do it again for 15 years. About the time I turned 30 years old, I took up jogging as a way of getting some exercise. I even entered some 5K races (3 miles).

Unfortunately, my speed did not increase with my age. In one particular 5K race, we were running through the hills of Newport Beach, CA. As I was running uphill, I was passed by someone pushing a baby stroller. I did not lose a step as I got older. I never had one to begin with.

In the races I entered, I was not saddled with the burden of having to worry about winning. I had no shot at that. My goal was simply to finish and collect my T-shirt.

I have since given up running and gone back to playing tennis. Even though I no longer run, I have thought a lot about the race the past few years.

My mother finished her race at the age of 84. My father finished his race at the age of 65. My brother, Paul, finished his race at 44. My nephew, Caleb, finished his race at the age of three.

I'm now 50 years old. While I have no idea how long the course is that God has laid out for me, I am probably closer to the finish line than I am to the starting line.

As a result of losing my mother, my brother, my nephew, and one of my mentors over the past seven years, I have begun to think about the question, "How do I finish well?" I have seen too many people who have failed in the second half of life.

"How can I conclude my race with my arms upraised in victory? When I come before the reviewing stand, will God smile at me? Will I sense his pleasure? How can I be a Joshua or a Caleb and finish strong?"

Because of my place in history, I know I won't finish first. Chances are, I won't finish last either. But will I finish well? I want to ensure that my name does not appear in the stat sheet followed by the initials DNF (did not finish), or worse yet, DNFW (did not finish well).

Do the Scriptures say anything about how to run the race? Does the Bible give us any clues as to how to finish strong with our head high and our arms upraised in victory?

These questions prompted me to search the Scriptures. In my study I discovered three passages that describe the Christian life as a race. These passages suggest eight principles that can help us to finish strong. The first four principles focus on preparing to run and the remainder speak of running to win. If we follow the advice of our coach, and train diligently, we will be able to finish well. If we add these principles to our training regimen, we will be able to finish strong.

The first passage is 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷ No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

The second passage on running the race is Philippians 3:12-14.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

The third passage is Hebrews 12:1-3.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ²Let 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 of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

PREPARE TO RUN

As each of these passages explains, we are in a race. A different course has been mapped out for each one of us. Some of us face higher hurdles than others. For some it feels as if the entire course runs uphill. The race is on. It is important to start right, but it is imperative to finish well.

How can we prepare for the race if we want to cross the finish line with our arms upraised in victory? What type of training regimen should we employ if we want to build up our strength and stamina so that we complete our race? What preparations do we need to make to be able to stand before the judges and receive a smile of approval? How can we finish strong?

RECOGNIZE THAT THE RACE ISN'T OVER YET (Philippians 3:12)

The first principle of running deals with our mental approach to the race. We need to recognize that the race isn't over yet. It's not time to hang up our shoes until we arrive at maturity.

In Philippians 3:8-11, Paul stated that his goal was to know Christ more fully. And yet, in verse 12, he admitted that he had not yet obtained spiritual maturity. “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.”

Paul, one of the greatest saints of history, one of the greatest missionaries of all times, admitted that he had not yet arrived at maturity. He did not yet know Christ to the depth that he wanted. If Paul had not arrived yet, what makes us think that we have?

The race we are running is not a sprint. It is not a 40- or even a 100-yard dash. It’s a marathon that lasts our entire life. We cannot take a break from the race, like the hare did in his classic race with the tortoise.

I once had someone tell me that they were going to take the summer off from church. I warned the individual that it would hurt his spiritual life. He later admitted I was right and that neglecting his walk with God got him into all kinds of trouble.

We don’t have the option of taking the summer off from Bible study and prayer. We cannot have the attitude of “I’ve done my share. Let someone else serve now.” There is no off season for spiritual growth and service.

I so appreciate the example of Caleb in Joshua 14. He wanted new challenges at the age of 85. He was a man with a growing faith in God. He was committed to lifelong learning. That is the kind of man I want to be and the kind of legacy I want to leave.

In our relationship with God, do we know him better than we did a year ago? Are we more patient than we were five years ago? Do we forgive more readily than we did previously? Do we demonstrate more compassion than before? Are we more effective in

ministry than we were last year? Is our progress evident to all, as Paul challenged Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:15?

If you find yourself sitting on the sidelines, get back in the race. Ask God to reveal where you need to grow. Remember that it's too soon to quit. Don't hang up your shoes until you arrive at maturity. Remember that your race is not over yet.

PRACTICE SELF-DISCIPLINE (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

In the Greek games, any athlete entered in the games was required to go into ten months of strict training and was subject to disqualification if he failed to do so. A contestant who failed to meet basic training requirements could not participate at all much less have a chance to win.

The nature of our race also calls for strict training, discipline, and self-control. This is the second principle of running well. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul recognized that self-control was crucial to victory. He stated in verse 25, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training." They exercise "self-control in all things" as the NASB puts it.

In verse 27, Paul applies that idea to the Christian life. "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." In the same way that an athlete can be stripped of their medals for failing a drug test, or an NFL player suspended for using steroids, so a believer can be disqualified from the race.

In the Greek games, the prize for the victor was a pine wreath. It represented fame, acclaim, and the life of a hero. Today, an Olympic athlete competes for a gold medal. It too represents fame, endorsements, and sometimes wealth.

Rather than rearrange our lives, habits, and schedules in order to be known as the “World’s Fastest Human,” we discipline ourselves to receive a far more lasting reward. We endure strict training in order to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” from our Lord and Savior.

The goal, being of eternal value, affects how we live in the present. The desire to know God better should get us out of bed in the morning and into his word. It means that we make the choice to pray even when we’d rather listen to the radio as we’re driving. It means that we work at memorizing Scripture when we’d rather be reading a novel.

Do you spend personal time with the Lord in prayer and reading Scripture at least three times a week? Are there at least one or two people in your life with whom you have built a friendship based on trust, confidentiality, and accountability? If you want to finish well, where do you need to practice discipline? What habits do you need to strengthen?

TAKE OFF THE WEIGHTS (Hebrews 12:1)

In football, you suit up. In running, you strip down. When you see the coverage of the Boston Marathon, you don’t see men and women with helmets on their heads, pads on their shoulders, flak jackets on their torsos, braces on their knees, or high-top cleats on their feet.

The average football player wears pounds of equipment. Runners wear ounces.

The third and fourth principles involved in finishing strong focus on removing the two things that prevent us from running well. According to Hebrews 12:1, one thing we need to remove is excess weight. The author of Hebrews explains that we are to “throw off everything that hinders.” We are to take off the things that hold us back.

When an athlete is in training, he may wear sweats, or wrap weights around his ankles or wrists. She may even run with a parachute on her back. But when it's time to run, the athlete strips down to the bare essentials.

The problem is not the weights themselves, but what they do. They slow us down and keep us from running well. In our lives, we need to lay aside anything that holds us back or impedes our progress.

Reading a newspaper or watching a television program may be minor considerations unless they distract us from reflecting on God's Word. A sport such as tennis, golf, softball, or soccer might be a source of physical exercise and fellowship but can also cause a person to neglect his or her family. Things like recreation, certain friendships, opinions of others, activities, books, and relationships can all be good things. But if they hinder us from making progress spiritually, they are weights that need to be removed.

LAY ASIDE SIN (Hebrews 12:1)

In addition to excess weight, we also need to lay aside sin. While excess weights may be a good thing turned harmful because they hinder us, sin is a bad thing that can cripple us. Hebrews 12:1 refers to it as "the sin which so easily entangles us." Some have called these besetting sins, ones that constantly harass or attack us.

Each one of us could probably identify the one area or sin that constantly threatens to derail our lives. Sins such as coveting, pride, lust, power, pornography, money, anger, insecurity, worry, bitterness, gambling, control, greed, possessiveness, arrogance, fear, doubt, a critical spirit, lack of contentment, and gossip are all sins that can hamstring and cripple us, or cause us to blow out a knee spiritually.

Whatever your besetting sin is, lay it aside. Take it off. Get rid of it. Put it to death, as Colossians 3 says.

One of Israel's besetting sins was complacency. They continually got into trouble when they were lazy and neglected their walk with God. They were tempted by idolatry. 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11 warns us not to fail like Israel did.

Have you reached a point where you feel as if you are at a stalemate? Does it seem as if your spiritual growth has plateaued and you feel like you are stuck? Can you identify the weights that are diverting your time, energy, and focus away from God? Can you name the sins that keep tripping you up? What hinders you from running freely? What will prevent you from finishing strong?

The person who finishes in the back of the pack or who drops out of the race is one who has kept back one or two areas of his or her life from the Lord. Their theme song is "I Surrender Ninety-Five Percent." In his heart, he knows it's wrong, but he's having too much fun to quit. She knows she is committing a great evil, but she is unwilling to stop.

The man or woman who finishes strong keeps nothing back from the Lord. He is brutal in dealing with the sin in his life because he does not want to dishonor God's name and holiness. She is ruthless in stripping away everything that might hinder her effectiveness.

RUN TO WIN

In order to finish well, we must recognize that our race isn't over yet. We need to run hard until we reach the finish line. We need to endure strict training. The desire to receive God's praise motivates us to practice self-discipline. We need to remove

everything that holds us back and impedes our progress. We must set aside the sins that threaten to trip us up.

If we want to finish strong, we have to prepare to run. But we cannot spend all our time in the locker room. We must step onto the track itself. If we want to finish strong, we also have to run to win.

WATCH OUT FOR DISTRACTIONS (Philippians 3:13)

As we round the corner and move into the heart of the race, we need to watch out for distractions. We need to put on blinders. This is the fifth principle of running. A runner knows that a backward glance can slow his progress toward the finish and possibly cost him his position in the race. In the same way, Paul says in Philippians 3:13 that he guards against distractions. He forgets what lies behind and stretches out toward what is ahead, so that he might complete the race and win the prize.

Someone once said that the only things that are behind us are either victories or defeats. Both can be distracting because great victories can lead to pride or complacency while great defeats can lead to guilt and shame. You can't run if you are looking over your shoulder. We need to keep our eyes looking forward.

Instead of focusing on the past, we are to forget about it. Forgetting does not mean obliterating the memories, but rather it is a conscious refusal to let them absorb our attention and impede our progress.

As the book of Joshua explains, memorial stones are important.⁴ We don't want to forget what God has done for us. But the danger of memorial is that can easily start worshipping the memories and dwelling in the past, rather than pressing forward towards the next thing God has for us.

Rather than developing a case of spiritual amnesia, it means that we no longer focus on the events behind us. The memories of the past neither paralyze nor discourage; the disappointments and temptations of the past no longer depress.

Over the years, I have seen many ways that God has answered prayer and blessed my life. There have been times of great triumphs. I have also suffered through some failures and some crushing defeats. While both the highs and lows are part of my background and have helped shape who I am today, I cannot allow either one to hinder me from moving forward. Just as I cannot rest on my victories, neither should I be crippled by my defeats.

GAIN ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE CROWD (Hebrews 12:1)

When Roger Clements pitched for the New York Yankees in Yankee Stadium, he would spend a few minutes in Monument Valley before every game. He read the inscriptions. He rubbed the plaques. He gained encouragement from the Yankee Hall of Famers who played for the team in previous years.

The next principle that will help us finish strong is to gain encouragement from the crowd. Hebrews 12:1 states, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Put in context with the list of heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, the “great cloud of witnesses” are those who have already finished their race, and handed the baton of faith off to us. Rather than being spectators in the stands, they are examples of those who have gone before us.

The older I get, the more people I know who are already in heaven. As a result, when I think of the great cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 12:1, I don't just see a vague, undefined, fuzzy picture. Portions of the cloud are taking on some definition. I'm beginning to recognize some of the faces—my dad and mom, my brother Paul, two of my uncles, my nephew Caleb, and one of my mentors, John Hoover.

As we run our race, we don't play to the crowd. We don't watch for the highlights on the Diamond Vision. We're not concerned whether or not we receive a standing ovation from the people in the stands.

No, we have an audience of One, God Himself, who will judge our work. But we look to the crowd of witnesses for encouragement. Their example, witness, and life motivate us to keep running. If they can run the race and finish well, so can we.

RUN WITH PURPOSE (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 3:12, 14; Hebrews 12:1-3)

We live in a culture that ends conversations with “Don't work too hard,” or “Take it easy.” The seventh principle of running stands in stark contrast. We are to run hard, run to win, run with an aim, press on, relentlessly center our energies on what lies ahead, and strain forward (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 3:12, 14; Hebrews 12:1-3).

We grow the most when we are stretched. Rather than resist change, we need to be like Caleb and seek out and accept new challenges.

In Philippians 3, Paul pictured himself as a runner whose every muscle and nerve is singularly focused on the goal, in the hopes of winning the prize. His life is purposeful. He lived with intentionality. He is focused on “one thing” as verse 13 says. The pursuit of the goal is his ultimate reason for running. He is running to win.

During the 1976 Olympics, Japanese gymnast Shun Fujimoto broke his knee in team competition. Everyone assumed he would withdraw. To the crowd's surprise on the following day Fujimoto competed in his final event, the rings. His routine was excellent, but the critical dismount was ahead. Fujimoto never hesitated—there was silence as he landed with tremendous impact on his knee. Then came thundering applause as he stood firm and erect. Afterward he replied, “The pain shot through me like a knife. It brought tears to my eyes. But now I have a gold medal and the pain is gone.”⁵

We are also to run with endurance as Hebrews 12 points out. Even though people around us bail out at the first sign of trouble, problems, or opposition, Scripture says to persevere. When people panic and start worrying, we confidently trust God to accomplish his plan and purpose.

We're in a marathon, not a sprint. We must be persistent and not give up and quit. We are to maintain a sustained effort that goes the distance.

FOCUS ON THE FINISH LINE (Philippians 3:14; Hebrews 12:2-3)

British runner Derek Redmond had trained every day for four years to give himself a shot at Olympic glory. After an injury-plagued career that included five surgeries and a forced withdrawal from the 1988 summer Olympics two minutes before his first race, Redmond appeared encouraged about his chances at the 1992 Barcelona Games.

In the semifinal round of the 400 meters, Redmond ran fluidly for 250 meters. Then suddenly, shockingly, he felt his right hamstring tear. Falling to the track in excruciating pain, he watched the other runners sprint past him and into the distance. In one heartbreaking instant, his bright hopes of an Olympic medal vanished.

As the medical attendants were approaching, Redmond fought to his feet. Determined that years of hard work and sacrifice were not going to be for nothing, he resolved to limp, hop, and crawl—if necessary—to the finish line. As the crowd roared its approval, he dragged himself to his feet and continued down the track, step by agonizing step.

When he reached the stretch, a large man in a T-shirt came out of the stands, hurled aside a security guard and ran to Redmond, embracing him. It was Jim Redmond, Derek's father.

"You don't have to do this," Jim said. "You don't have to put yourself through this."

"I've got to finish," Derek said.

"Okay," Jim said. "We started your career together, so we're going to finish this race together."

With arms around each other, Jim and Derek Redmond trudged down the track. Fighting off security men, the son's head sometimes buried in his father's shoulder, they stayed in Derek's lane all the way to the end. Entering the final stretch, Derek sagged into his father and began sobbing.

They crossed the finish line as the crowd of 65,000 rose to their feet and cheered wildly. Millions of television viewers around the world watched as father and son completed the race together. Derek Redmond—with the help of his dad—had become an Olympic hero even though he never won a medal.⁶

The final principle of running is to focus on the finish line (Philippians 3:14; Hebrews 12:2-3). In Philippians 3:14, Paul encouraged us to press toward the goal for the

prize. “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” The goal refers to the race being run while the prize refers to the glory that follows.

One of the things that should motivate us to finish well is the fact that awaiting us at the finish line is Jesus Christ. We are to keep our eyes on Him as we run. Jesus Christ provided us with the supreme example of how to run the race. Hebrews 12:2-3 reminds us,

“² 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 of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Each one of us is running a race. We will finish the race. But will we run well? Will we finish strong? Will we receive a smile from the judge at the end of the race?

If we want to finish strong, we need to recognize that our race isn't over yet. We cannot hang up our shoes until we reach maturity. We must practice self-discipline. No one wants to be disqualified.

We must remove anything that impedes our progress. We must take off any excess weight that holds us back. We need to lay aside sin. We cannot afford to be hamstrung or crippled.

As we run, we need to watch out for distractions. We must refuse to let anything absorb our attention or distract us from our task. We should gain encouragement from the crowd. The ones who have finished their race serve as examples for us to follow.

Rather than take it easy, we need to run hard. We must relentlessly center our energies on what lies ahead and strain forward. As we pursue the prize, we maintain laser lock, focusing on the finish line. We run hard, knowing that Jesus is waiting for us at the end.

The Greeks had a race in their Olympic games that was unique. The winner was not the runner who finished first. It was the runner who finished with his torch still lit.⁷

I want to run all the way with the flame of my torch still lit for Christ. When I cross my finish line and step into the arms of my Savior, I want to hear, “Mark, you didn’t finish first. You didn’t finish last. But you finished well. Well done.”

WHEN THE FINISH LINE APPROACHES

1. Recognize That The Race Isn’t Over Yet
2. Practice Self-Discipline
3. Take Off The Weights
4. Lay Aside Sin
5. Watch Out For Distractions
6. Gain Encouragement From The Crowd
7. Run With Purpose
8. Focus On The Finish Line

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU TURN ON THE NIGHT LIGHT

1. Describe the race that God has laid out for you to run.
2. Is there a part of your life where you could use more discipline? What is it?
3. Is there anything holding you back or hindering you from running well?

4. Have you ever thought about what it would be like to finish your race and receive your reward from Jesus? How would that change the way you are running today?

¹ Powell set the world record on June 14, 2005 at the the Tsiklitiria Super Grand Prix meeting in Athens, Greece, <http://msn.foxsports.com/other/story/3689156>

² He set the mile record in 1999 at the World Championships in Rome.
<http://www.answers.com/topic/hicham-el-guerrouj>

³ ESPN Magazine, May 27, 2002.

⁴ See Joshua 4 for more information on the importance of memorial stones.

⁵ <http://jvm.com/coachfree/MotivationalStories.html>

⁶ http://www.olympic.org/uk/athletes/heroes/bio_uk.asp?PAR_I_ID=65848,
<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/espn25/story?page=moments/94>

⁷ Joe Stowell, *Fan The Flame*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986, p. 32