



## RUN

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Federal Way, WA  
November 4, 2007*

The Peabody house has earned a reputation among the younger crowd as a great house for weaponry. In fact, Max Warnke referred to our house as the weapons house for about a year after he first came to visit. We've got light sabers and swords and guns for every kind of galactic battle you could imagine. It seems slightly wrong that the pastor's house should lead the way in violence and destruction, but then I remember that the safety of the universe is at stake. We stand on a wall, people.

We also have our fair share of squirt guns. One of my favorites is called the stream machine. It has this big chamber. You stick it down into a pool or a bucket and pull up on the handle. There's this whooshing suction effect. Just filling it up is kind of a good feeling as you sense just how much water is going into the tube, until it's so full you can barely aim the thing. It's the weight of the power you know you're going to unleash.

But the point is not to run around with a tank full of water. You need to put it to good use. So you pick up the gun, point it at your target and shove the handle in as fast and hard as you can. And this powerful stream of water shoots like a cannon and goes about 3 miles. Or yards at least. All that water goes out in one shot, soaking everything in its path. It's beautiful.

Last week, as we looked at all those amazing people of faith in Hebrews chapter 11, it was like filling up the tank. We took in story after story. Noah. Abraham. Moses. Joseph. You could feel the weight grow as we heard one example after another, people whose faith in God helped them go through unimaginable hardship.

But the point wasn't just to load up on stories. And now as we come to Hebrews 12, the author takes aim and shoves in the handle. With a single word, "Therefore," he turns that list around and it bursts into action. There's a force and velocity to his words as he brings all those stories together and says, "Now. Here's where to go with this."

### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

*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.*

*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.*

*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

The Sonics have been in the news the last several months in their fight over Key Arena. They want a new place to play, and the owner threatened to move them if they didn't get it. It was just a little over 10 years ago that the arena was rebuilt to the tune of almost \$100 million. The governor has gotten involved and it has become a major source of controversy.

You might think Americans are the only people obsessed with their sports facilities, but the fascination goes back thousands of years. We've said that we think the book of Hebrews was probably written to Christians in Rome, and there were some pretty amazing stadiums in Rome around that time. The Circus Maximus could hold 250,000 people. That's over 10 times as big as Key Arena. The Stadium of Domitian was another one, and it was built around 87 A.D. to hold the Olympic games of that day.

These are the kind of images that would probably have come to mind for the readers of Hebrews when the author introduced this image of a race, with the runners surrounded by the huge cloud or crowd of witnesses. They could picture a sea of people in the stands as the athletes prepared to run.

But this was no ordinary crowd of spectators. These are all the people out of chapter 11, people who had already run the race. When the Seahawks went to the Super Bowl, that was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Superbowl, and before the game, they brought out 30 of the past MVPs. Some of them looked like they could barely walk, they were so stiff with old injuries. Even for somebody like me, it was impressive to see all those great players of the past from different eras, side by side.

Now imagine a whole stadium where every seat is filled with most valuable players, cheering on the new teams. That's the image the writer of Hebrews is using as he talks about this cloud of witnesses, these heroes of the faith who surround us as we get ready to run our own race.

And yet there's an even greater difference about these spectators. They're not really there to watch us. They're called witnesses, but it isn't so much that they're witnesses of our race as that they're witnesses to God's faithfulness. They're standing up and reminding us the kind of God we serve. As F.F. Bruce puts it, we're watching them for inspiration more than they're watching us. They're not our fans – they're God's fans, watching what he will do next.

The metaphor of running is used quite a few times in the Bible, because it gives us such a great visual way to understand the Christian life. Isaiah talked about running and not getting tired. Paul loved to talk about the race we're in. It's a motivational message. Even today, motivational posters will use photos of runners to inspire and encourage us to keep going. You've seen them: Determination. Commitment. Believe.

When you think of a runner, what do you think of? Here are some ways to tell if you yourself are a runner:

**You may be a runner if...**

- Your calves are bigger than your biceps.
- Pizza, pasta, pizza and pasta are your four main food groups.
- You check your heart rate while saying the pledge of allegiance.
- You consider your Nike dri fit socks to be dress wear.
- You constantly smell like icy hot.
- You can no longer smell icy hot.
- Steve Prefontaine's birthday means more to you than your own.
- You're a guy, you weigh 140 lbs. and you're trying to lose weight.
- Your underwear covers more of you than your running shorts.

Just a few tell tale signs. Runners haven't changed much in the past 2000 years, which is another reason why this metaphor works so well. The last two bullet points – the one about losing weight and the one about less clothing are exactly the same concepts the author of Hebrews grabs on to as he encourages us to run.

*...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...*

The word translated as “everything that hinders” is really the Greek word for weight. It could be body weight or something you're carrying on your back. Whatever weighs us down. The writer says “Get rid of anything and everything extra.”

There are a couple assumptions in that statement. The first is that **we've all got something to lose**. We've all got extra baggage of some sort that's weighing us down. He doesn't say, “For those of you who need this advice, throw off the extra weight.” It's a universal. We've all got something to lose.

The second assumption is that **we're not playing around anymore**. If you ever go to a grade school track meet you know what you'll see? Many kids will be there running in their street clothes. Jeans and sweatshirts. Hats and clunky shoes. By junior high, they're in tank tops, shorts and lightweight track spikes. Why? Because they're beginning to take the racing seriously and they know any extra weight is only going to slow them down. They're beginning to keep track of their PRs – their personal records, watching their own progress.

How serious are we about our faith? Has there been any growth lately for me spiritually? Am I seeing any progress in my PRs? Some people don't want to be seen as taking their

faith “too” seriously, because they don’t want to be seen as some kind of fanatic. But to not work at it is like shuffling around the track in your baggy jeans and sweatshirt. Hebrews describes the Christian life as a race, and for a race to be meaningful, you have to take it seriously.

Let us throw off everything that hinders, all the weight holding us down. When the author talks about that extra weight, he doesn’t get specific about what he had in mind. He said ALL that weighs us down. What is that for you? What weighs you down?

I listed some choices in the outline for this morning. Your past. There may be things you just can’t forgive yourself for. Your family of origin. Your parents may have saddled you with huge amounts of baggage. Your expectations. Living up to who you think you should be. Your finances. Your hurts. Or something else. Take just a minute to identify or circle what you think your own biggest burden is right now.

It’s easy to say “throw off the extra weight” until you look at what the weight actually is. Then suddenly saying that sounds very trite, like telling somebody, “All you have to do is lose 50 lbs.” Oh really? Thank you. That’s so helpful. You’re not saying anything new. It’s not a matter of knowing – it’s a matter of doing. We all know we’d be better off without our burdens, but what does it mean to throw them aside? The author of Hebrews seems to think it’s possible, but how do we get out from under the heavy load?

If he doesn’t give us a formula, I’m certainly not going to invent a pat answer that is supposed to work every time. But as I reflected on this and how other Christians have worked through this verse, it seemed that most of the time, we begin to find a way out with three simple realizations.

The first is to say, “**I’m not Jesus.**” I’m not. All these heavy, heavy thoughts and burdens – I’m incapable of carrying them. And if I’m continuing to try, I’m essentially trying to do Jesus’ job. A few weeks ago, we talked about Isaiah, where it says he carried our sorrows. We also looked at Jesus inviting or even commanding us to come to him with our burdens. He’s the only one big enough to take the crushing weight of the world on his shoulders.

To insist on constantly walking around with the extra weight I carry is in some ways to believe that I can actually do it. And I can’t. I’m not Jesus.

We especially like to try to do that for other people. A couple years ago, I met with a friend who described his mom as always inserting herself in a crisis. And I thought, “That’s what I do!” I will convince myself that I somehow need to step into somebody’s life and lift their burden for them. That makes me feel important and needed. But that’s Christ’s job – not mine. I’m not Jesus.

The second thing to say is, “**I need you, Jesus.**” I need you to carry this. I can’t do it any more. Actually verbalize it. Talk to him specifically about what it is that has been weighing you down so much.

Peter uses very similar vocabulary to Hebrews when he says,

**1 Peter 5:7**

*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

We don't just roll the boulder off our own backs – we transfer it to Jesus. And we do that by literally asking him to take it for us. Something happens when we go through the act of releasing that burden verbally. It's like the old line that "confession is good for the soul." Admitting our need for Jesus out loud to him begins a process of letting us out from under the weight.

Did you see in the news this week where a car in Seattle ran over a stroller, trapping an 18 month old boy underneath it? A bunch of construction workers had to come over and lift up the car so they could pull the boy out, who miraculously was unhurt.

I think about the helplessness of that boy under there. He couldn't budge the car himself. All he could do was cry out and wait for help. Sometimes as impossible as it is for us to carry our load, it's equally impossible for us to throw it off. All we can do is cry out to Jesus, tell him our need, and wait for him to do the heavy lifting. And he can do it. He HAS done it.

I need you, Jesus. It's a humbling admission to make, even when we're tired of carrying the weight on our own. Nobody likes to feel needy. And that ends up being what keeps us trapped under the car. I'm fine. It's a little heavy, but I'm okay. I can manage. I'm tired, but isn't everybody? This is just my burden to bear. That's the lie we tell ourselves to avoid the truth. We need Jesus, and we need to admit that we need him.

Some of you feel trapped under a car or even a bus this morning. Maybe you even crawled under there yourself and you don't feel you deserve the help. Call out to him anyway. He's the only one who can do anything about your situation.

Once we've said that, it's time to say, **"Thank you, Jesus."** After we've asked him for help, we step out in faith that he will answer that cry. We live like it's true. We thank him for what he's done and what he's currently doing for us. This takes us back to what we talked about last week – living by faith. We live like the reality is true even before it feels like it or looks like it. We take God at his word. When he invites us to give him our burdens and we do that, we trust that he in fact has them in his hands now.

The trouble is, I keep wanting to grab it back. When I worked at the ad agency, my boss would normally give the presentations at client meetings. After a decade or so of going to these meetings with her, I was pretty well up to speed on what needed to be said. In many cases, I was even closer to a project than she was. So finally one time, we were on our way to see a client, when my boss said, "You can do the talking today."

The meeting started, and no sooner did I open my mouth than my boss popped in to clarify something before I could get to it. And the next thing you knew, she was doing the whole presentation. It became a standing joke between us, because after so many years of doing it herself, she couldn't really let go of it and trust that I had things under control.

That's how I am with the burdens I give to Christ. I say, "I need you" but I can't quite get to "Thank you," because I still want to carry the weight myself. That's what I'm used to. And I end up back at the beginning of the process again, needing to remind myself that I'm not Jesus.

I'm not Jesus. I need you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. That little three step cycle may sound too simplistic. You might be sitting here going, "It's not that easy. You don't know my burden." And you're right. I don't. But honestly, if you have a more complicated way that's better, I'd like to hear it. These are not my steps – they're the time-tested methods of the people now sitting in the stands. Learning to live dependently and gratefully is what will help free us up to run toward Christ.

It isn't only weight that the author of Hebrews mentions. He said we should also throw off the "sin that so easily entangles." Another way to put that would be the sin that skillfully surrounds us. While the weight pressing down on us doesn't necessarily have any agenda, the sin that reaches out to grab us is intent on stopping our progress. And it isn't hard for it at all.

Again, the author doesn't get specific, and I think that's because for each person, the easy sin is going to be different. It's the one that pops up in your life all the time that's so close to you that you hardly call it sin. Maybe there's some bitterness in you, but you excuse your attitude by saying, "It's because I'm so tired." Or you're a gossip but you disguise it as prayer requests. Or you struggle with lust but you laugh it off saying, "Hey, I'm married – I'm not dead." Or pride lurks around in your heart, but you think it's excusable, given how exceptional you are. Or your anger is out of control, but you dismiss it because you feel like it's just part of your temperament. And we could keep going with greed, selfishness, laziness and so on.

They are the sins that have no trouble grabbing us. Any one of those can sideline us. They do it first by distracting us. Something about the sin is attractive to us or it wouldn't be a problem. It catches our attention and diverts our focus. As it consumes more of our time and energy, we have nothing left to pursue God.

But these sins also cripple us. They make us incapable of running. We can't make progress in our faith when we're entertaining sin. The two are incompatible. So we're left with a choice: Do we throw off the sin and start running, or do we live with it and hobble along, not getting anywhere?

Something is grabbing at you even today, and you're the only one who knows what it is. But you're going to walk out of here today and it will already have started to blend back

into the background. Since now is the time you're actually thinking about it, I want to give you a moment right here to confess it to God and ask him to help you break loose from it. Throw it aside. Ask his forgiveness. Right where you are – take a minute to talk to God.

With this giant crowd of witnesses around us who have set such a great example, we throw off the weight, we extract ourselves from the sins that are working against us and we run. We run with all our might toward Jesus. That's the main verb in these verses. Run. Put your energy and effort and heart into moving forward. And then he says we run with endurance.

**The Christian life requires long-haul faith** We're in a marathon – not a 50 yard dash. Jesus talked about the people who will start out fast and furious in their faith, only to burn out and fade away because they didn't go deep enough. We all want to see instant changes in ourselves. Then we slip up and fall into old habits. We want to see quick answers to our prayers, but things seem to take forever. And we get discouraged. In part it's because we imagine that this race is all about quick victories.

If you talk to any marathon runners, you find that they have a much different motivation for running than sprinters do. Sprinters are competitive. Their goal is usually to beat the other runners.

Marathon runners, on the other hand, aren't necessarily hoping to win. That's not what it's about for them. They go into the race with a different mindset. Completion is the goal. Maybe they're running in someone's memory, or to raise money for a cause, or because they just turned 40, or just to prove they can do it. This picture is of John Stephen Akhwari from Tanzania at the 1968 Olympics. He was in dead last place in the marathon. The winner had been declared over an hour before he entered the stadium. Most people had already left when he limped in with a bandaged leg. A reporter asked him, "Why did you keep running when you had no chance of winning?" Akhwari seemed a little confused by the question and said, "My country didn't send me here to win. They sent me here to finish."

We're here to finish. To put it into a nice catchphrase, **we're not here to compete – we're here to complete.** Our goal is not to compare ourselves to other Christians, but to finish and finish well. We see somebody else who seems about ready to lap us they're so far ahead of us and we want to just give up on it all. But God isn't measuring us against each other. That's not how this race works.

William Carey was one of the first missionaries to India. He was British, and this was the 1800s, so there really was no turning back once the decision was made. He uprooted his family and took them across the ocean to a completely foreign setting. It was incredibly difficult work under terrible conditions. He lost a son, his wife had a breakdown and he faced every kind of obstacle imaginable. But he stayed 41 years and translated the Bible into several languages that had never had it before. When he was

asked how he was able to keep going in spite of all that happened, he said, “I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.”

“I can plod?” That sounds so unexciting. I want to go at a faster pace than that. But this is a race that requires patient endurance. The bursts of energy that come from major breakthroughs in our life are great. But they don’t last. What matters is continuing in what Eugene Peterson calls, “A long obedience in the same direction.”

That idea of “same direction” is important, because the author of Hebrews says we’re to run with perseverance “the race marked out for us.” **There’s a course to follow.**

In Detroit, they have an annual Turkey Trot on Thanksgiving. In a 10K race like that one, it’s not uncommon for an occasional runner to get lost and go off course. But back in 1997, the course had been altered slightly. The lead police car went the right way, but a very loud and convincing spectator screamed at the runners that the car was going the wrong way and they needed to take a different turn. She was adamant. So about 5,000 runners went the wrong way that day, trusting her voice rather than following the car. She sent thousands of runners into the streets of Detroit without a lead vehicle. Runners were jumping barriers and trampling crowds because there was no clear path. It was a nightmare.

So often, I’d prefer to run my own course instead of the course laid out for me. I’ll listen to the voice in my head that says, “This way would be better for you. Trust me.” And I end up creating my own nightmares because I couldn’t follow God’s lead. If I could just learn to stick with what Hebrews says, I would discover more peace and freedom in my heart. Can I stick to the route God’s laid out for me?

### **Proverbs 3:5-6**

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make your paths straight.*

The author concludes his racing analogy by once again pointing us to Christ:

*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.*

*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Much could be said about this section, but I want to focus on just one thought with you this morning, and that is this: **We’re running toward a person.** We’re running toward Jesus himself.

Anthony Hopkins once described a class of young acting students that he was teaching. They were all very earnest and eager to develop their craft. And he told them, “That’s all fine. Get good at it. But then let it go and act because you enjoy it.” A musician doesn’t play an instrument just because they’ve been disciplined for years and years and learned a skill. They play because of the joy it brings them.

As we talk about running with perseverance and doing all the hard work of pursuing faith, it’s so good that the author reminds us what’s at the heart of the Christian experience. Jesus did what he did for us because joy was waiting.

Picture SeaTac airport. A man gets off a plane and starts walking down the concourse. His wife and young son are walking to meet him. Suddenly the boy sees his dad, lets go of his mom’s hand and tears across the airport at full speed and into his dad’s arms. He’s so excited to see him that he couldn’t wait another second to reach him.

That’s racing toward a person. He wasn’t thinking about his stride or a fast start or how long it would take him. He was just trying to get there because of his joy.

When Jesus moved through this life toward the cross and beyond, there was a sense in which he was disciplined and focused on doing what was right. But his goal was his reunion with his father. The joy of that thought kept him going and gave an urgency to all he did. He wasn’t in a race to simply do a good job – he had a person in view that gave the race its meaning.

And that’s what gives our race its meaning. We’re racing toward Jesus. He is down on one knee at the finish line with his arms open wide to receive us when we get there. That’s why the author of Hebrews holds him up and tells us to consider him – not so much to look at him as our example as our destination. We work hard at our race, but it is motivated by joy.

We’re celebrating all that Jesus did for us today as we take part in the Lord’s Supper in a few moments. As you prepare your heart to meet him there, I encourage you to think back on those three steps we talked about toward the beginning: I’m not Jesus. I need you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Let those words guide your prayer as you turn to him for help in running your race.