

Followers of the Way

Running the Race with Perseverance

Alice Jones, 15-03-26

Hebrews 12:1-3; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

When did you last run a race?

For me, it was when I was at school, aged 16. Someone from my class was required to run the 200 metres at the annual sports day. I had zero sporting ability or inclination, but no one else wanted to do it and eventually I reluctantly agreed. I knew the other girls in the race were good at running, unlike me, so I was certain to be last. As the entire school would be watching this race, my aim was to be respectably last, not noticeably far behind the others. When the race began and I sprang into action, I was aware of a blur of faces alongside the track, but my focus was entirely on the gap that was already widening between me and the other runners ahead. Determined not to fall any further behind, I concentrated all my efforts on propelling myself forwards as fast as I possibly could. Very soon I started feeling terrible, I could hardly see anything and my legs were starting to buckle, but thankfully I made it to the finishing line before anything worse happened. I have no idea how far behind I actually was, but afterwards I felt vastly relieved to have got through it, and as I was in my last year of compulsory education, I would never have to do anything like it again.

I'm grateful that running the race of faith as described in the letter to the Hebrews is not in any way dependent on our physical abilities or lack of them. But I find it challenging to compare my life as a Christian with running a physical race, and I ask myself: Spiritually, do I experience the same sense of urgency, the same intense focus, the same supreme effort? Or is my Christian life more like a leisurely stroll with a bit of window shopping thrown in?

We know that none of our own efforts can save us. But having accepted the free gift of salvation by putting our trust in Jesus, we must do our best to follow the Holy Spirit's leading and to resist the opposing pull of our sinful nature. Being an overcomer requires effort. Ephesians 2:8-10 says: *'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.'* Jesus' parable of the talents shows us that God expects us to use whatever He has given us to glorify Him – and He will require an account from us of what we have done. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says: *'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.'*

Hebrews 12:1 says that we are surrounded by *'a great cloud of witnesses'*. Thinking about that sports day race, the fact that the whole school was watching made me put in an unprecedented amount of effort. I soon ran out of energy and was naturally inclined to slow down, but the embarrassing prospect of trailing in far behind everyone else made me keep up the pressure. While running, I couldn't see the people watching, but I knew they were there and would certainly have comments to make once the race was over. Of course, God sees everything we do and knows everything that passes through our minds, and He is aware of how we spend every moment of our time. But more than this, Jesus said *"there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* (Luke 15:10) What could be more encouraging than to know that when we struggle with temptation or discouragement or fear, as we try to do what is right in God's sight, the whole company of Heaven is watching and willing us on to succeed?

Hebrews chapter 11, immediately before this passage, gives a long list of people from Old Testament times whose lives were examples of faith – Hebrews 11:13 says *'All these people were still living by faith when they died.'* They ran the race with perseverance, and considering our own experiences, alongside what God enabled them to endure and achieve, gives us valuable perspective.

Our ultimate role model is the Lord Jesus, *'the pioneer and perfecter of faith'*. He set us off on our race of faith, He is beside us through it even though we can't see Him, and He is waiting for us at the finishing line. In His earthly ministry, Jesus experienced the pressure and suffering that the image of the race represents, culminating in the unimaginable pain of crucifixion. But He persevered because He saw beyond this life. He knew that after this suffering He would rise from the dead, full of joy because He was returning to His place beside the throne of God, having accomplished His mission to make it possible for everyone who trusts in Him to be saved. In the same way, we need to persevere in our race of faith regardless of any opposition and difficulty we might experience, knowing that there is joy waiting for us beyond this life, after we have passed the finishing line. We will see Jesus face to face, and I don't know about you, but I can't imagine relief greater than hearing Him say *"Well done, good and faithful servant!"* Whatever trials we have experienced will be permanently in the past. As Revelation 21:4 says, *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Runners naturally focus on the finishing line, but significantly, in Hebrews 12:2, we are instructed to fix our eyes on Jesus. We can't know when we will reach the finishing line, the moment of our death, at which point there will be no further opportunity to repent of sin in our lives or to do anything that God has been prompting us to do and we have left undone. Jesus said *"Remain in me, as I also remain in you."* (John 15:4) By keeping our eyes on Him, by remaining in Him, we are guided by Him, we know what He wants us to do from moment to moment, and He gives us joy and strength to keep on running for as long as the race lasts.

In Hebrews 12:1 we are urged to throw off not only *'the sin that so easily entangles'*, but also *'everything that hinders'*. This race is more important than anything else, and has eternal implications. We need to jettison anything that stops us from running to the best

of our ability by taking up too much of our time, energy, focus or resources, even things that aren't wrong in themselves.

Commentators disagree on the identity of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, but I believe it was Paul, not least because no other Bible writer uses this image of the race of faith, and Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and 1 and 2 Timothy. He is also quoted using it in Acts. Paul applies the image both to his own experiences and to the general experience of Christians, often using it to challenge our complacency by showing that even though we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, we also still have a sinful nature, making failure in our Christian life all too possible. In 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul uses the image to reveal the intensity of his own efforts against complacency: *'I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.'*

We might think that with Paul urging them on in their race of faith, those early believers could not fail to have been encouraged to run with perseverance. Yet, sadly, we know of at least one who stopped running and abandoned the race. This was Demas, who was mentioned as a companion of Paul and Luke in Colossians 4:14, and as one of Paul's *'fellow workers'* in Philemon 1:24. These two letters are thought to have been written in the period from A.D. 61 to 63. Yet within just a few years, in Paul's second letter to Timothy which is thought to have been written in A.D. 66 or 67, Paul wrote that *'Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.'* (2 Timothy 4:10)

There is no further information in the scriptures as to what happened to Demas. It seems likely that as he saw the persecution rising that would lead to Paul's martyrdom, he couldn't face losing his life because the things he enjoyed in this world seemed more real and important to him than God. We are warned in 1 John 2:15-17 that love for God and love for the world are mutually exclusive: *'Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.'* Jesus Himself said: *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"* (Mark 8:34-37) Demas must have known these words of Jesus, and he spent a great deal of time with Paul, yet he still abandoned the race.

The Bible has many examples of people, like those listed in Hebrews chapter 11, who ran the race with perseverance and were still living by faith when they died. But there are also many who started well but whose race of faith was hindered or wrecked altogether. 2 Chronicles, with its histories of the kings of Judah, is particularly illuminating as to what can go wrong in a person's race of faith. An overview of 2 Chronicles reveals that, of those kings of Judah who started well, there were two main risks to their race of faith: firstly, their own pride, and, secondly, bad influence from people around them.

It's noticeable that pride tends to become a problem in later life. We are told in 2 Chronicles 14:2 that King Asa at first *'did what was good and right in the eyes of the LORD'*, removing idols from the land and commanding the people to seek God. During the ten

years of peace that followed, Asa explained to the people that, *“The land is still ours, because we have sought the LORD our God; we sought him and he has given us rest on every side.”* (2 Chronicles 14:7) Later, when war broke out, Asa experienced God’s direct intervention on the battlefield in response to his earnest prayer. After this, encouraged by a prophet, he led the whole population of Judah to make a covenant to seek God with all their heart and soul (2 Chronicles 15).

In the 36th year of his reign, Asa was tested and he failed the test. The king of Israel invaded Judah, and this time there is no indication that Asa called on God to help. Instead, Asa removed the silver and gold from the LORD’s temple, which he himself had previously placed there, and used them to buy assistance from the king of Aram. Somewhere along the line, Asa had stopped trusting in God and had started to behave without regard to Him. Why?

There’s a clue in what happened when God sent Hanani the seer to warn Asa about this. 2 Chronicles 16:10 reads: *‘Asa was angry with the seer because of this; he was so enraged that he put him in prison. At the same time Asa brutally oppressed some of the people.’* Asa’s ego was more important to him than hearing the truth from God. Pride had corrupted him from the inside, in the same way that it corrupted the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who refused to accept Jesus when He came to them. 2 Chronicles 16:12 tells us that *‘In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the LORD, but only from the physicians.’* Two years later Asa died of the disease. No indication is given that he ever turned back to God.

King Uzziah was another casualty of pride. Again, he started well, doing what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and again God blessed him with success. Then in 2 Chronicles 26:16-19 we read:

‘But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. They confronted King Uzziah and said, “It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honoured by the LORD God.”

Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD’s temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead.’

As a leper, Uzziah spent the remainder of his life in seclusion. Again, there is no indication that he repented.

Even King Hezekiah, at the end of his life, was briefly thrown off course by pride. His reign had been exemplary. We read in 2 Chronicles 31:20 that he did, *‘what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. In everything that he undertook in the service of God’s temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. And so he prospered.’* When the Assyrian army invaded Judah, God

answered the prayers made by Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah by striking dead 185,000 fighting men, commanders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king, who then fled. 2 Chronicles 32:24-26 tell us what happened next:

'In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to the LORD, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD's wrath did not come on them during the days of Hezekiah.'

Coming under bad influence from others was also a later-life problem for some of the kings of Judah. King Solomon had been chosen to build the magnificent temple of the LORD in Jerusalem. At the dedication of the temple, 2 Chronicles 7:1 tells us that, *'When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.'* God had appeared to Solomon twice and had blessed him with unprecedented wisdom, riches and honour. Yet, under the influence of his many foreign wives, Solomon disobeyed God who had been so generous to him:

'As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.' (1 Kings 11:4)

King Jehoshaphat *'did what was right in the eyes of the LORD'*, and 2 Chronicles 17:3 tells us that *'The LORD was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the ways of his father David before him.'* However, Jehoshaphat made unwise alliances, not once but twice, and suffered the consequences. He had allied himself by marriage to Ahab, the wicked king of Israel, and he allowed himself to be persuaded to join Ahab in battle. In 2 Chronicles chapter 18 we read that Ahab, who evidently did not have Jehoshaphat's best interests at heart, persuaded him to enter the battle wearing his royal robes, while Ahab wore a disguise. As a result, Jehoshaphat almost lost his life, but God rescued him when he cried out for help. Later Jehu the seer brought him this message from God:

"Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Because of this, the wrath of the LORD is on you. There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have set your heart on seeking God."

Jehoshaphat accepted this reproof and redoubled his efforts to turn the people of Judah back to God. But towards the end of his life, he made another unwise alliance:

'Later, Jehoshaphat king of Judah made an alliance with Ahaziah king of Israel, whose ways were wicked. He agreed with him to construct a fleet of trading ships. After these were built at Ezion Geber, Eliezer son of Dodavahu of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, "Because you have made an alliance with Ahaziah, the LORD will destroy what you have made." The ships were wrecked and were not able to set sail to trade.' (2 Chronicles 20:35-37)

Let's see what we can learn from Paul's race of faith about how to avoid these two pitfalls of pride and bad influence from others.

Most importantly, Paul kept what Jesus had done for him at the forefront of his mind. Before that seismic encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul had tried to destroy the church of God. Although he knew that God had forgiven him, he never forgot what he had done, as he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:9: *'For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.'*

Knowing that Jesus had chosen to intervene directly to save him, and change him from a persecutor to an apostle, kept Paul safe from pride. Like John the Baptist, Paul knew that Jesus must become greater and he himself less. Paul's words of farewell to the elders of the Ephesian church are recorded in Acts 20:23-24:

'I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.'

Paul's letter to the Romans shows us how to avoid the pitfall of pride:

'For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.' (Romans 12:3)

Regarding how to avoid the pitfall of bad influence from others, in 2 Corinthians 6:14 we are warned not to be *'yoked together with unbelievers'*, meaning close relationships such as marriage or a business partnership. However, in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 a distinction is made between associating with non-believers who are by definition living sinfully, and associating with people who call themselves Christians but are living in defiance of God's laws. The implication is that the former may be open to hearing the gospel and repenting, but the latter are likely to be a bad influence. 1 Corinthians 5:11 says: *'But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.'*

In Galatians 1:10-11 Paul wrote:

'Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.'

Living under the direct influence of Jesus, Paul was shielded from bad influences from people around him, and as a result God used Paul to influence countless people for good, right down to us today. Jesus had appointed Paul to be *'a herald and an apostle and a*

teacher' (2 Timothy 1:11), and Paul never ceased to do everything he could to fulfil this calling. Even in prison, Paul was looking for opportunities to evangelise, starting with the soldiers to whom he was chained. Close to the end of his life and facing execution, Paul had peace of mind knowing that he had run the race with perseverance:

'For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.' (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

Ecclesiastes 7:8 sums it up: *'The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride.'*