

Word association time: what comes to mind when I say the word *perseverance*? For me, one of the first thing that pops into mind is a long distance runner.

Back when our youngest, Ezra, was in Children's, our days were somehow at the same time, incredibly busy and boring. One day I passed the time by watching the marathon trials for the US Olympic Team. I was blown away by their perseverance. The guy who won is a man by the name of Galen Rupp. He ran the marathon (26.2 miles) in 2:11:12. That means he averaged 5 minute miles the entire way, all 26.2 miles... I can't even run one 5 minute mile...

Perseverance - sticking with something even though it is difficult to do - to me, the men and women I watched run that marathon are a living picture of perseverance.

Well, maybe you know where I'm going with this... Today the writer to the Hebrews wants us to take a page from Galen Rupp's play book. Today the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to **"run with perseverance the race marked out for us."**

Life is a race - it's a metaphor we can all understand. Life has a beginning and an end. At the end, there will be winners and there will be losers, and the stakes to this race couldn't be higher. At the end of this race, those who win, those who do well get heaven - the prize of life in the presence of God where peace, happiness, contentment, and rest after the race will never end. But for those who lose, those who do not do well, those who fail to persevere in the race of this life: hell, eternal suffering apart from God - no peace, no happiness, no hope, no rest, forever.

Life is a race, there's a beginning, an end, and there is a whole lot of work that needs to be done between that beginning and that end. And how we perform dictates whether we win or lose. Life is a race, life is a marathon - it is an easy and accurate metaphor - this morning then, is a training session for that race, our coach, the book of Hebrews.

If we are going to run this race well, the first instruction that Hebrews gives us a reminder to avoid things that are sure to trip us up and slow us down in this race.

As a general rule, Olympic marathon runners wear as little as possible - short shorts, tight shirts, lightweight shoes. It would be absurd if Galen Rupp showed up to the Olympic marathon this summer with a 100lb pack strapped to his back. It would just be silly if he showed up with a jump rope in hand, planning to hop his way those 26.2 miles. It's ridiculous to even consider, right?

Step one to running the race of life well is understanding what would make us lose, or as Hebrew's puts it, **"Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."**

It's crazy to even consider someone who is serious about running a race showing up with all sorts of things that would weigh him down or trip him up. That's clear. That's logical. We all understand that imagery.

Why is it then, that we are so bad at applying that to the race of our lives?

We all know what sin is. God makes that perfectly clear in the Bible - those Ten Commandments you've all heard of. And we know that if life is a race, sin is going to do nothing but slow us down and trip us up. Why is it then that we are seemingly so inconsistent at remembering that when we wake up each and every day? Think about it.

Is obsessing about getting more money in your bank account going to help you or slow you down in the race the God has called you to run?

Just like picturing Galen Rupp with a 100lb pack on, that question should be a no-brainer - it's going to hinder you in this race. Why is it then that we sacrifice so much on the altar of earthly success and comfort? We sacrifice time with our families at home, and our families at church. We sacrifice time with the word of God. We skimp on our offerings. And does any of that help you win the race? No!

Or what about this: do you think that momentary desire for that other woman who is not your wife, or that fleeting sense of satisfaction you feel when you look down on someone else, or that brief relief you feel when instead of turning the other cheek, lash out in anger, do you think those things help you or slow you down in the race God has called you to run?

Or that awkwardness that you avoid when you keep your mouth shut instead of speaking up when a co-worker misuses the name of your God, or that possible persecution you dodge when you don't invite people to come and see the Jesus you know, do you think those things help you, or slow you down in the race God has called you to run?

Just like picturing Galen Rupp trying to jump rope his way to a marathon gold medal, those questions should be no-brainers - it's going to hinder you in the race of life. Why is it then that each day we wake up and we get so easily entangled in myriad of sins that confront us?

Why is it? Well, it turns out that *perseverance* isn't something we are all that good at. If we are talking about the race of this life, and if winning this race is based on my performance, my perseverance, then I don't stand a chance... and neither do you. Because even though it makes no sense, even though we know better, every day we wake up and strap on hundreds of pounds of sin and grab our weighted jump-ropes of iniquity and we try to hop our way to the finish line.

What do you think of when I say the word *perseverance*, well, it certainly isn't me, and it certainly isn't you... no, we are far too easily distracted and weak to stick with it in this race. Just like running a marathon, the life of faith that God has

called us to is difficult and requires that we sacrifice ourselves to our God, and perseverance – sticking with this race even though it is difficult to do – is all too often the furthest thing from what describes our lives.

But the story doesn't end here, the race doesn't end here – it should, right? If things were fair, if this race was fair, we should all walk out of here with the full realization on our hearts and minds that we have already lost. We might as well give up now because if winning the race of life depends on our performance, our perseverance (even a little bit), then we don't stand a chance. But the race of our lives doesn't end here with our failure...

When we stumble and we fall in the race of this life, when we lose, we look up in desperation and what do we see this morning? Today we see another person running the race of this life, and he's running it *for* us. And if we are going to talk about perseverance, the race we see him running today is the very definition of perseverance.

“Fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endure the cross, scorning its shame.”

Look at Jesus this morning, see him riding resolutely into Jerusalem on a donkey, and realize what is going on. He knows what is coming for him, he knows the difficulties he is going to face.

Even though the coming days he is going to be tempted and tested with difficulties you and I can barely begin to imagine, he is riding straight for it. Why? Because he wants to win the race of this life for *you*, for all of us people who are incapable of running the race the way we should.... Even though it would be hard to stand there while his own people joined in the grisly chant “crucify, crucify, crucify,” even though it would try him and test him when the soldier spit in his face, mocked him and ridiculed him, even though it would hurt so much that they would make a new word to describe the pain he would go through (*excruciating* is a word that means “from the cross”), even though Jesus was riding into Jerusalem knowing that all of that was waiting for him, **“For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame.”**

He saw that his life was a race, and if he won, if he persevered, if he never once allowed sin to hinder and entangle, if he pushed through the pain to the end, he would secure victory for you, heaven for you – and nothing would make him happier, nothing would give him more joy than to be able to pick you up off the ground and say, “You win, because I persevered for you.”

What we see today in Jesus' triumphant entrance to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, knowing what he would have to go through in the coming days, is the very definition of perseverance – and that means more than words can say for people like us – people who should have lost the race of life, but now are winners already because Jesus persevered for us.

The race of our lives doesn't end with our failure, it ends in our victory, and all because of Jesus.

It should be just as much of a no-brainer then to read the final coaching for the race of this life given to us in Hebrews 12: **“Fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him, he 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 sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”**

Fix your eyes on Jesus.

When this world starts to weigh you down with its pressures, burdens, and expectations, when you feel like you are just barely hanging on in the race of this life and you are pretty sure that you are not keeping your priorities straight, not persevering the way you should, fix your eyes on Jesus.

When this world starts to trip you up with its never-ending stream of appealing temptations, when you don't think you have it in you to stand up to those temptations any longer, when you fall for those temptations, fix your eyes on Jesus.

Fix your eyes on Jesus, he is now and always will be the pioneer and perfecter of your faith – that race of faith that you are running so poorly, you don't have to lose heart, you don't have to grow weary, because he ran it for you.

So, I'll ask it again, what comes to mind when I say the word *perseverance*? I hope that for the rest of your life you recognize the perseverance we see in Jesus throughout his life, and especially in the events of holy week, starting with Palm Sunday and ending on Good Friday, because that my friends is the definition of perseverance.

Amen.