

Hebrews 12:1-13

September 4, 2022; Pentecost 13

His name was Pheidippides. He lived about 490 BC. He was employed as a day runner by the Athenian military in ancient Greece. The day runners carried messages between either the different units in the army or messages between the different cities in Greece. Because of the terrain in that area, they would be the fastest way to communicate.

The Persian army had begun to invade Greece as they expanded their empire from the East. The army in Athens were vastly outnumbered. They needed help. So, they sent Pheidippides to Sparta asking for their help. The Spartans were well known for their military strength. Time was short. The terrain was mountainous and rugged. But Pheidippides was up for the challenge. The two cities were about 140 miles apart. For two days Pheidippides ran and made it there in record time. Sparta gladly agreed to help, but they could not leave for about a week because they were in the middle of a religious celebration. So, Pheidippides ran back to Athens (another 140 miles) with the disappointing news.

The smaller Athenian army immediately marched to the plains of Marathon to prepare for battle. Pheidippides joined his fellow Athenians to fight against the Persians. The Athenian Army was outnumbered 4 to 1, but they launched a surprise offensive which at the time looked suicidal. Yet, on the Plains of Marathon, the smaller Athenian army defeated the Persians. The Persians were forced to retreat. They had hoped to re-assemble and attack the Athenians in a different location. Pheidippides was again called upon to run to Athens (26 miles away) to carry the news of the victory and the warning about the approaching Persian ships. Despite his fatigue after his recent run to Sparta and back and having fought all morning in heavy armor, Pheidippides rose to the challenge. Pushing himself past normal limits of human endurance, he ran the 26 miles back to Athens from the plains of Marathon in perhaps 3 hours, delivered his message – *“Nike! Nike!” (“Victory! Victory!”)* Then he promptly collapsed from exhaustion and died. This story is the basis of the modern marathon race.

Few of us can even imagine running 26 miles. Yet, we are involved in a race. It is the race of our lives. We read in our text today that we are to **“run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”** The race is our lifetime on this earth. The start line is when we are born. The finish line is the end of our lives. At times, it can be a grueling race. Yet, there is comfort in those words – **“the race marked out for us.”** A racecourse must be plotted and planned by those who are in charge. They must see to it that the runners know where they are supposed to go. They help the people as they run their race.

God had plotted and planned our course, as well. Before the world was created, he knew what was going to be our starting time. He planned the course that we would follow throughout our life. He knew what we would meet before we started the course. He also knows when we will finish our race. It is so wonderful to know that I am not running aimlessly. God is in complete control of my life. He has planned my course. I say with great joy, **“My times are in your hands.”** (Psalm 31:15) God has planned my life long race.

That does not mean that this race is going to be easy. You and I both know that we face many obstacles as we run our life’s race. What are we supposed to do when we run into an obstacle? Give up? Quit? Our God encourages us, **“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”** Perseverance means we keep on working at it. You keep going, and God himself will help us as we run our race.

How does God help us? He acts as our trainer. Every athlete has a trainer, who pushes the athlete to do better. The trainer helps the athlete improve their skill. Sometimes that pushing can hurt. The writer draws the comparison between what a father may do with his children. Sometimes, he has to discipline them all for the purpose of making them stronger. **“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”** The motivation to discipline is love. It may not feel good to have God discipline us, but we know that it is for our good. It is there to help us on the race of our life. There are many times when we feel like giving up. It’s too hard. That is why the writer to the Hebrews gives us the inspiration to keep on running. **“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of 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.”

A coach who hopes to inspire his team might point to someone as an example of what can be done. So also, we are pointed to a perfect example. We are to keep our eyes focused on Jesus as we run our race. Why? He is the **“pioneer and perfecter of faith.”** Jesus is the one who brought our faith to perfection. If Jesus hadn’t completed his race, if he had not lived a perfect life, had not died an innocent death, had not risen from the dead and had not ascended into heaven, there would be no reason for us to run our race. We would still be stuck in our sins. Even if we wanted to run the race that God would want us to run, we could not do it. But he did run the race for us. Because of that eternal life is waiting for us at the end. Let us run our lifelong race with Jesus as our constant inspiration and strength to keep on running.

Why keep our eyes on Jesus? **“So that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”** What happens when people take their eyes off of God. Let’s look at a couple of people who did. Adam and Eve. What happened when they took their eyes off of God and looked at a piece of fruit? Cain. What happened when he took his eyes off of God and looked at his brother in jealousy? He killed Abel. Moses. What happened when he took his eyes off of God and tried to help the Israelites on his own? He killed an Egyptian. King David? He committed adultery.

But look what happens when you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Look at Noah – his family is saved. Abraham – he became the father of a great nation. Moses – he led the children of Israel out of Egypt. The disciples – they took the Gospel to the world. The Apostle Paul – he preached the Gospel in and out of prison.

When things are tough, when everything goes against you, when you might feel like quitting and hanging up your running shoes, keep your eyes on Jesus, he will see you through. When you believe that you aren’t going to make it; you are too stressed, too worried, too depressed, too sad, too sick, keep your eyes on Jesus, he will see you through. When you begin to believe that it’s too hard, you doubt or you fall, Jesus picks you up, dusts you off, lovingly points us to the finish line. His love will not give up. His forgiveness is never ending. His joy is to see us all arrive at the finishing line and receive the prize of eternal life. **“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.... so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”** Amen.