

“Never Give Up”

Hebrews 11:32-12:3

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Derek Redmon was about halfway through the 400m race at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain when his hamstring snapped. Immediately, he fell to the ground writhing in pain. As a medical team showed up with a stretcher, Derek waved them off, determined to finish the race he had trained so hard to run.

As he limped toward the finish line, his father climbed down the bleachers, jumped over the rail and ran to his son’s side. With about 120m left in the race, Derek’s father put his arms around him and helped him to the finish line. About two steps from the end of the race, Derek’s father stepped back so his son could cross the finish line on his own.

“I am the proudest dad alive,” he said later. “I am prouder than if Derek had won a gold medal.”

Today’s text draws our attention to a foot race. The writer compares the Christian life to running a race, complete with obstacles and challenges. His emphasis is not upon winning the race but finishing it. “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” he writes.

I like where he places the emphasis. I have never been accused of being a fast runner. The only races I ever won were the sack races or three-legged races we ran on the school playground.

For me, the key word in this passage is **perseverance**. Regardless of how many times you fall down, or how much of a struggle it is to stay in the race, don’t quit.

On October 29, 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill visited Harrow School, one of England’s oldest boarding schools located in the northwest section of London. It was founded in 1572 and is still in existence today.

Churchill’s visit was during some of the darkest days of WWII when daily bombing raids threatened their security and sanity. His heart was touched as he listened to the children sing the traditional songs he learned while a student there.

As he stood to speak, he looked into the fearful, yet hopeful faces of these young students, which moved him to say, "Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never -- in nothing, great or small, large or petty -- never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

The writer of Hebrews would have liked what Churchill said. Perseverance was a theme he wove throughout his book, which is a collection of sermons.

"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us," he writes in this particular sermon.

What race are you just about ready to quit? What responsibility or commitment has worn the leather off your tennis shoes and sucked the air out of your lungs?

After my daughter finished college, married, got a job and started her family, she called me one day to say, "Dad, I'm tired of being an adult." I probably wasn't much comfort to her that day because I replied, "Amy, I am, too."

Perhaps you have had days like that. Maybe this is one.

What do you do when you are ready to throw the towel in? I get the feeling the writer of Hebrews was dealing with people who were ready to abandon their faith and move in a new direction. Life was tough for them, more difficult than they thought it would ever be.

They were enduring trouble and affliction every day in the form of ridicule, discrimination, scourging, imprisonment and persecution. Would this ever end? Could they remain faithful to God and live like Christ in the face of such great challenges? They were not sure.

So, what did the writer of Hebrews say to them? What advice did he offer his readers?

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, **let us lay aside** every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and **let us run** with perseverance the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus** the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

The preacher told them not to quit. He assured them what they were doing was important and necessary, even if they did not always see results. He encouraged them to take the baton handed to them from those who had already run their race and pass it on to the next generation.

Is this the message God wants you to hear today? What do you need to do in order to stay the course and be the best mate, parent, student, friend, business owner, employee, neighbor, church member and citizen you can be?

Perhaps you need to do what the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to do. What was that?

To begin, simplify your life. Get rid of anything holding you back and keeping you from running your race, the same way a runner in that day removed his outer robe which prevented him from running a swift race.

“Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,” he wrote. Focus on what truly matters to you, and what is needed from you at this time in your life and let the rest go.

Who is depending on you to be focused and prepared to carry your end of the load? Who needs you to be at your best and live up to your potential, resisting the temptation to be selfish and self-centered? Who needs you to say no to anything that is harmful and yes to all things good?

Who needs you to be wise and disciplined, willing to make sacrifices on behalf of others? Will you do it? I hope so and am confident others do, too. There is a lot at stake in your decision to stay in the race. Why not begin this morning by identifying what you need to “lay aside,” and ask God to help you do it.

Next, adopt an “I’m not giving up” attitude.

This was what Churchill wanted to instill in the hearts of those young boys that day at Harrow. Everywhere he went, he repeated the words, “never give in” to a beleaguered people who had grown weary.

The writer of Hebrews did the same thing. “Let us run the race with perseverance.” **“Let us run,”** he wrote, including himself in this challenge.

The perseverance the writer refers to is one that will let no obstacle crush it or any discouragement take it away. It is the passion of a parent protecting a child from danger. It is the strong will of a Derek Redmon who refused to let anything keep him from getting to that finish line. It’s that tenacious.

The distractions we face and forces of evil we’ll confront each day as we run our individual races are alluring and intimidating. Only a resolve which matches their intensity will overcome them. If we don’t have this “I am not giving up” attitude, we’ll fall to the side and disappoint ourselves and others. By God’s grace, don’t let that happen to you.

Most importantly, look to Jesus for inspiration and God for help to complete your race.

The writer of Hebrews set up the first part of chapter 12 by listing many heroes of the faith in chapter 11. The women and men he mentioned in the previous chapter were meant to inspire his readers to remain faithful. With God's help, if they could endure what they went through and remain faithful to God's call upon their lives, so could those who responded to Jesus' call upon their lives.

The writer concluded this list of spiritual mentors by mentioning Jesus, who was faithful all the way to the cross. The same God who helped all these saints, including Jesus, was available to help them, and is eager to help us.

By the way, who else would you include on your "list of inspirational people?" Carlyle Marney calls these "balcony people." These are the people who have gone before who are now cheering for you. They are your "cloud of witnesses" who have handed the baton to you.

Who is on your balcony? Family members? Friends? Teachers? Preachers? Coaches? Have you told their stories to your children? Perhaps you need to do this, as the writer of Hebrews has done.

Do you think anyone will cite you as an example of faithfulness in years to come?

If you stay in the race they will.

If you are resilient and faithful in the midst of adversity they will.

If you resist the temptation to be self-centered and undisciplined they will.

If you get up after you get knocked down they will.

If you complete your race and pass on the baton to those who follow, they will.

I know someone who will help you do just that. Let's talk to Him now in prayer.

