



The Great Race

Part 2 – Long Distance Running

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So, as we talk about *Long Distance Running*, the Robbins family has been grinding it out recently. We're experiencing some fatigue. About four weeks ago, two of my siblings, who both live in town, and their families came down with the Corona virus. Shortly thereafter, my mom and dad, Rob and Susan Robbins, who have been a part of Woodland Hills since it was founded, came down with the Corona virus. Mom and Dad have had a really hard time with it. About 12 days in, mom was starting to get dehydrated because she just couldn't keep in fluids and food. Dad finally brought her into the emergency room.

My dad, as sick as a dog, pulls up to the emergency room here in Branson and they both kind of stumble their way in. They take mom and sweep her off into the Emergency Room and there's dad, standing there with a mask on. He can't even enter the Emergency Room area. He watches his wife be swept off and back into those rooms where our wonderful healthcare workers began to take care of her.

They run all kinds of tests. They find out that my mom actually had developed double lung COVID pneumonia. As you know, that is the path that is taking people's lives when the lungs and respiratory system breaks down. This has begun a great trial for my family. Within the day they moved her into the ICU and then from the ICU, they decided they needed to get her up to Springfield because her case was so severe. Mom was brought up to Springfield.

I don't know if you're aware of this but we're finding out the painful way. Cox Health Centers and I would suppose all of the hospitals up in the Springfield area are being inundated with COVID. They are actively opening up new floors and wings. Mom was placed in the COVID Unit where they essentially had gone in and completely cleaned out a floor. They wiped out the floor and made a makeshift COVID Unit with pipe and drape.

She was in there struggling for her life. As family members, it was excruciating for so many reasons, but one of the main things was we couldn't be there with her. My dad was feeling so crummy that I kind of took the lead for our family and have been the communicator with the hospital. It's been really hard because the nurses and doctors are on the run, on the move getting information and trying to understand what's going on with Mom. It's been difficult. I want to give our health care providers all the credit in the world because they are stressed. But as a family member, we're stressed to. It has been a grueling process.

Of course, I happen to be preparing a message on endurance and trials. As we've walked through this, I've been asking myself a question and I'm going to ask it of our church body. I think it's a really important question. As you answer the question, the ramifications that it has in your life are significant. The question is this: What does faith have to offer in the midst of hardship and trials? If the answer you arrive at is very little, then you're wasting your time. But if you arrive at an answer that is full of substance, that is full of hope, and full of provision in your time of need, it is great and wonderful news.

So, I invite you with me to ask that question. What does faith have to offer in the midst of hardship and trials? To answer that question, we're going to go to a couple of different passages. We're going to camp out in Hebrews 10, 11, 12, and then we are going to end up in Romans 5.

If you care to turn with me, you can go first to Hebrews 10. I've read this text before, but I don't know that it's ever impacted me like it has during this season. Just to give you a little bit of a background, we don't know who the writer of Hebrews is. There are all kinds of theories, but whoever was writing it was writing to the Jewish people who were in great suffering and persecution. They've walked away from their traditional Jewish faith and they have recognized Jesus Christ as the Messiah. There are all kinds of tensions. Not only is there tension within the Jewish family, but there is also tension within the Roman Empire because there is only one king in the Roman Empire and that is Cesar. As Christians are placing their faith in King Jesus, they are meeting persecution on every side. The writer of Hebrews takes these last several chapters in Hebrews to encourage these people that are walking through a tremendous trial.

Hebrews 10: 35 is a passage that jumped out to me. It says, **35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.** Speaking there of those believers' faith. Don't throw away your confidence. What I've been reminded of is that when we walk through trials, there are all these emotions going on and we feel like we need to make some decisions, we need to do something. Some of the questions we can be asking when this fight or flight response stirs up are: Why, God? Has God forgotten me? Is God even real? If God is good, how can I be going through this? I'm just going to give up. If we take that confidence in our faith and we cast it aside in an emotional response, it's replaced with doubt.

James writes about doubt. He describes it as waves that are tossed to and fro in the ocean. The wind tosses them around; they have no control, they have no footing, they have no foundation. So, when we cast aside confidence, it's replaced with doubt.

But the writer of Hebrews doesn't stop there. In Hebrews 10: 36, he says, **36 You have need of endurance...** It's not an emotional response. It's okay to be emotional. We're very emotional in this season. But to act out of that emotion is not going to help you, rather you have need of endurance. The Robbins family has need of endurance during this season **...so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.** My friends, don't allow your confidence to be shaken. You only have need of endurance.

One of my favorite books is called *The Heavenly Man*. It's about Chinese Brother Yun. He is a missionary in the underground church in China. He often talks about how western Christianity has lost focus of biblical Christianity. One of the challenges he offers specifically in a situation like this... he says this: *"We shouldn't pray for a lighter load to carry, but for a stronger back to endure."*

James writes in Chapter 4, ***You have not because you ask not.*** The reason he says that is he wants to give us the freedom. When you need something, you go to your Daddy in heaven and feel free to ask, “Lord, take this thing from me if you will.” Even Jesus demonstrated this on his knees, with blood coming out of his forehead, as he is excruciating over the cross in front of him. He says, “Father, if you would, take this cup from me.” But he goes on, “Not my will but thy will be done.”

And as I’m in this situation personally, within our family, I recognize that God is allowing us to walk through this trial. We’ve asked him to take it away. But right now, we’re praying for endurance because we fill that’s what he wants us to do.

That begs the question, if endurance is the prescription, how do I do that? How do I endure when I’m walking through trials? I’ve got a buddy who is 21 years old. He’s all excited for hunting season this year. He’s at a fish fry. The fryer itself, with all the hot oil, got pushed over and that oil fell on his feet. I heard about it and I called him up. He’s in his bed, with his feet up, swollen up like balloons. As I’m talking to him on the phone, this kid’s heart is breaking. He’s in so much pain. He’s looking at a long, long road of recovery. How should Jess endure? How does he do that?

There are marriages that are struggling in our church and in our community. That is some of the worst kind of pain. How do husbands and wives endure? How do we do that?

COVID is ramping up again. Moms find themselves homeschooling again. Healthcare workers are stressed to the max. Teachers are juggling in class, out of class, quarantined kids, and we are nine months into this thing. How do they endure?

Hebrews 12 is where we’re going to go to find our answers. I think you are going to be encouraged along the way because the writer of Hebrews gives us some clarity. Hebrews 12: 1 goes on like this: ***1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...*** So, this passage is following the famous passage of Hebrews 11. It’s called the Hall of Faith or the Hall of Fame. As you read through it, it’s all these Old Testament saints who have endured. They’ve run the great race and they’ve been approved by their faith. As I’ve been studying, one thing I’ve noticed is that as I go through this hall of fame, I notice that every single one of them was a mess. They were a bunch of ragamuffins that were approved through faith.

That gives me hope. The writer says, “Hey, you’re not alone. All those who have gone before you, they are in the stands of heaven and they are cheering you on.” ***...let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely...*** In the New American Standard those obstacles are called an *encumbrance*. So, every encumbrance and the sin which easily entangles us, ***and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...***

So, here is **step one** for those of us who wish to run with endurance. Step one is first we throw off encumbrance and the sin that is so weighing us down. Encumbrance represents an extra weight or burden that’s on you. It might not necessarily be your fault that it’s there, but it’s there. It might be there by choice; it might not necessarily be a sin, but the bottom line is it’s an encumbrance that weighs you down.

So, a question we need to ask ourselves is this: What is distracting us or unnecessarily weighing us down? As I've asked myself while running this week with a heart to have endurance, I realized one of the things that was unnecessarily weighing me down. An encumbrance that was on my shoulders as I've been dialed into the election in the weeks leading up to it and the aftermath. I was spending a lot of time and emotional energy investing in that and it was weighing on me. I know that you guys can feel that or understand that. It doesn't matter who you voted for or what side you're on or what your political beliefs are, we are all familiar with that tension that's real. I realized I was piling in on myself as we're walking through a tremendous trial in the life of our family. I just said, "You know what? I've got to throw this aside." So, about ten days ago, I stopped looking at the news. I don't even know who the president is right now. Don't tell me. I'm at peace.

It was an encumbrance and as you ask yourself that question, there might be a half dozen things that pop up that don't need to be there right now. And you can easily take it and remove it from your shoulders. That's step one.

Here's step two – Sin is that which is offensive to God. So, guilt, shame, and wreckage from sin are unnecessary loads. We don't have to be carrying all that weight. Guilt, shame, and wreckage from sin are unnecessary, so what sin do you need to take ownership of to confess to God and others in an act of repentance. Here's the beauty of walking with Jesus. When you confess your sin to God, he is faithful and just to forgive you of your sins and to cleanse you of all unrighteousness. Let me unload these encumbrances. Let me unload the sin and this garbage that is weighing me down.

Here's step three. Hebrews 12 picks up - ***2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*** Do you see that? So, we lay off every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us and we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

I am a little bit like Adam in that I only ran one marathon. I don't intend to run another one. But being the dumb-dumb that I am, I started doing triathlons shortly thereafter. So, I went through a season. You guys might remember when they were doing the half Ironman series. It came through Branson three years in a row. I got on a half Ironman kick. For three years, I ran four of those races.

I was a decent biker and a fairly experienced runner, but swimming... My wife says I swim like a water buffalo. There is supposed to be a wake behind you, but there is a wake in front of me. As part of that race, you have to do a 1.2-mile swim. So, I spent a lot of time in the water trying to figure this thing out. On race day, it's extremely intense. Biking has etiquette. You ride, you pass on the left. In running, you just gently go around each other.

But when you are in a race with 150 savages around you, when you get in the water, it's kill or be killed. In fact, one time, when I was swimming, my hand fell on the calf of the guy in front of me. He pulls his calf out of my hand and kicks me in the chest like a mule. I could not believe it. I'm thinking that if he had kicked six inches higher, I would have sunk to the bottom or been flat faced today standing here before you. When you take off in that mob of bodies, everybody is swimming and water is splashing up. There are bodies all around you.

You know that if you slow down, people don't swim around you, they swim over you. So, it is super intense. As you're swimming, especially in these open water swims, you can find yourself going to the left and the right because it's so hard to see where you're going. Every once in a while, you need to poke your head up and find your point of reference. Where am I going? There is an end in sight. You poke your head up, find the finish, and then you put your head back down and you swim. Poke your head back up, put it back down. What that does is it gives you direction, gives you efficiency. It helps with endurance. And you know what else? With every stroke, it's encouraging because you're getting closer to the finish line.

Some of you might feel like you're drowning right now. In the past several weeks, I can relate. Throw off every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us and fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Let me finish that passage **3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** Do you see this? With encumbrances and sin set aside, we fix our eyes on Jesus and follow his example. We have an example of how to run. That's what discipleship is in faith, right? When we give our heart to the Lord, we're a new baby in the faith. For those of us who are older and mature - those are the gray hairs in the audience - you need to find young people to come alongside and show them how this thing works. And for those of us who are the young bucks and the young gals in the audience, we need to find somebody with the gray hair and come alongside them and say, "Let me buy you a coffee on Tuesday morning. How do you like your eggs?" And spend time to have an example, a path to follow. Jesus is being the ultimate example. The Messiah is acquainted with your suffering and he shows you how to run the race with endurance.

Now watch this. I love this phrase. **Who for the joy set before him...** Did y'all hear that? For the joy set before him... Your example in running with endurance, he had a goal, and end in mind. It was joy that was set before him. And as a result, the joy was so great, it was so good, it was so worth it, that he **...endured the cross and as a result He received glory!** You need to read back through these passages. But as you read back through the passage I shared, every single one is reaffirmed with glory, with blessing, with reward, every one of them. **This is the purpose driven life** that we talk about. Who for the joy set before him.

I want to talk about that. What is the joy set before us? When you find yourself in the grind, you want to give in and you want to give up, you preach the gospel to yourself. Is anybody in need of good news? Do you know that the good news was not just meant for the day of your salvation? It's more powerful than that. It's more purposeful than that. It has more to offer than that.

I want to go to Romans 5. We're going to talk about this. How does it work? What does that joy look like? Refresh me, Lord, help me understand what the joy is set before me? Romans 5 says, **1 Therefore, having been justified...** The way I remember what that means is "just as if I'd never sinned." Justified **...by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult (celebrate) in hope of the glory of God.** There it is. There's your affirmation. Keep going. Run with endurance. We stand in this grace.

What is the joy set before us?

- To be free of sin once and for all.
- To be a dead man or a dead woman no more. You've been brought from death to life.
- No more pain suffering and death.
- Receive a glorified body.
- In and out of a Golden City that is your heavenly abode where Jesus has prepared a place for you for eternity
- Rewarded for acts of service.
- Crowned with righteousness.
- No eye has seen, now ear has heard, no mind can comprehend all that God has awaiting you... this is your glory in Christ.

After going through this list... watch this. Here's what Paul has to say. **3 And not only this...** Do y'all hear that? No more sin, no more pain, we celebrate that, and not only this... We celebrate a heavenly abode, and not only this... We celebrate glorified bodies, and not only this... We celebrate crowns in heaven, and not only this... We celebrate a crown of righteousness, and not only this... **but we also exult in our tribulations...** Is there anything between the joy set before you and the tribulation that you're in that you cannot celebrate in Christ?

I'll tell you this. There are a lot of different tones to celebration. Some of them are loud cheering and dancing. Others have the tone of the celebration of a life well lived at a funeral, but it is a celebration. Here's why. We celebrate in our tribulations, **knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance...**

I'm going to make a point before we move on. The thing that we want removed is the thing that God has chosen to use. If you pray and you ask him to remove it and he removes it, that is a blessing. If you pray and ask him to remove it and he doesn't, he means it for blessing. He takes all that which is broken and, oh by the way, sinful man is the one that has messed it up. But he takes all that which is broken, and he redeems it because that's who he is.

Romans 5 continues **4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.**

1 Peter 5: 10 says, **10 After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory...** Here is it again, here's the glory thing. **...in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.** God doesn't waste a hurt. The trial you are walking through will produce great fruit. He only requires of you endurance. And he wants to help you along the way.

Trials, tribulation, and suffering unfasten our grip from this broken world and magnify a hope that doesn't disappoint. So, brothers and sisters, run with endurance.

On Monday, we got to bring Momma home. She's got a long road ahead of her. We didn't know... Because communication was so fractured, we didn't know how close we were to losing Mom. She said one night she was convinced she was going to die. She had given up. She was gasping for breath. She doesn't know how she made it through the night.

One day, my mom is going to go to be with the Lord. So is my dad, and my wife. It's part of life, isn't it? But I'm really thankful that we get some more time with Mom. And Mom saw some really horrible things in the ICU. The lights are never off and they're never quite on. She could hear the beeping of all the machines. She could hear the screams of the people around her. She could see, when the beeping and the screams started, the healthcare workers and doctors and nurses started running back and forth through the hallways, through the cracks of the sheets that were hanging from the pipe and drape. She saw bodies being carted out past her room.

There is a lot still that we have to unpack. She has a little oxygen machine in the house. She'll get up and she'll scoot over there and say, "I'm just going to have a little drink. I won't drink too much." She says, "It just makes me feel so good." I said, "Mom, you're making that look so good, I might have a drink myself."

Mom has a ways to go. But you know what she tells you when you ask her how she's doing? She says, "I feel alive!" Every time. "How are you feeling, Mom?" "I feel alive!" What a great example. Her lungs are still a mess, she can't leave her house, she's got some hard things to deal with emotionally, but she feels alive! And I pray that we might run with endurance. Was that an encouraging word? I think they call it the good news for a reason.

Lord, thanks for being a God that has a good plan even for hard times. I just want to pray, God, that the power and the truth of your Word would breathe refreshment into our church family. I pray that we can bring that refreshment out into our community and into the world, to our family members, our co-workers, the person waiting on us, the person changing our oil. I just pray for refreshment.

I pray God for all the families that are wrestling with loss right now, that are less fortunate in this season. I shouldn't say less fortunate because you give, and you take away. All of us are blessed who have faith in you. But we pray for those who are hurting and experiencing loss, that you would care for them and comfort them.

I want to pray that we would take your Word and apply it to our life and that you would give us the endurance we need for today. Tomorrow has enough worries of its own. Lord, give us the endurance for today and then give us a perspective to be able to celebrate and enjoy today no matter what we're going through.

It's in Jesus' name we pray... Amen.