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## **The Great Race**

### **Part 3 – Running for the Prize**

Pastor Ted Cunningham

Welcome to everyone spread out across this campus and community and country. We have people watching from everywhere. Welcome to all our church at home family; we hope you are well. We know many are recovering, many are in quarantine, so we're glad you are able to join us today. To those over at the Chapel and the Gathering Place... I even saw a few brave deer hunters outside in our outdoor venues. I know they're thinking, *If I can sit in a deer stand, I can sit outside.* And all the deer hunters said... Amen. Raise your hand if you got your deer this year. Wow! Alright, very good. Congratulations. The outdoor seating is right out there; if you want to feel like you are in a tree stand, we've created that special space. No guns, though. We don't want you to bring your riffles onto campus, but we're glad that you're here.

We want to begin today with a journey of God's faithfulness and your stewardship. We want to give several thank-yous to start off our time today as it is Thanksgiving week and as Matt just shared, what a great time to say thank you to you, the Woodland Hills family, and we say it almost every week. We want to start by just saying thank you, Woodland Hills, for your generosity. I just want to walk you through the last several years... I'm still shaking my head at all that God has done through this church family.

For years, the early years of our church, we would have a reserve fund. That was just for emergencies, that if something were to happen – bad weather days or whatever – we'd be able to continue to support missionaries, ministries here at the church and in town. For years, that reserve account was \$100,000.00. Then Jim Sedlacek became an elder at our church over ten years ago. He said that a church this size and with all that's going on and all those who are counting on us, that seems pretty low. So, he raised it to \$200,000.00. Then he left to move to Phoenix to be with his kids. While he was gone the first year or two, somehow that reserve account grew \$400,000.00. Again, this is just emergency money we would keep around in case something... I don't know... like a pandemic were to hit.

When Jim passed away last January, he gifted our church \$200,000.00 and we said let's put that into the Jim Sedlacek emergency fund, which is what we always called that. And then somehow, between that time last year and March, the emergency fund grew to \$800,000.00. Then March hit and we all stood up here in the middle of March... There was nothing going on, on campus, and when the cameras turned off on that first Sunday after Joe White spoke and the Sunday after that, it was a very emotional time for our team and for the entertainers that serve in our worship ministries. Remember, at this point in March, we hadn't heard of things like PPP loan and we hadn't heard of the \$600.00 extra that people were going to be getting on unemployment.

Our elders said, "This is why we have this; this would be a time... No one knows how long the campus has to be closed down, but we've got this money and we'll use it during this time."

I just want to make sure you know that between that time in March and September, somehow, we were able to grow the reserve fund to a \$1,000,000.00, so not only did we not spend out of it, but the reserve account grew. I want you to know... I know a lot of churches took it, but we did not take the PPP loan. We have said from the very beginning for over 18 years, this church has had zero debt, forgivable loan or not forgivable. So, we just did not take the PPP. We are just blown away at all that God has done.

A couple of weeks ago, someone walked into the office and handed us a check for \$562,000.00. A gentleman who considered Woodland Hills Family Church his home passed away last August and left that to us. We immediately did what we do with all gifts that come into this church. We gave to the ministries in town, to missions, which is 13% of everything that comes in. The reserve now is up to \$1,500,000.00. At the end of this year, in the middle of a pandemic and we can say, "only God."

I need you to know we never planned on this. I woke up this morning with the thought, *Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the Lord that directs the steps*. We never set out to have this. Some of you are going, "Do we still need to take offerings?" Yes! Because I want to participate in this. I want to be a part of this. Some of you are like, "Is it good stewardship for a church to have that kind of money in reserve?" Well, to be honest with you, it's been called an emergency reserve, but as we've grown toward this number, we may be calling this very soon a building fund. Does anybody know what I'm talking about?

If you are new to our church, you need to know this is rented space that we are in. When it comes to kind, benevolent, and gracious landlords, you will not find more kind, benevolent, gracious landlords than the Herschend Family Entertainment Corporation. We've been renting from them for about 16 years, but this is commercial space. We've always been told, on a year to year lease, that they could sell it or develop it. We understand that and we're in line with that. Last year, before the pandemic, before we even heard of COVID-19, conversations started ramping up that we may need to consider other facilities. So, I'm here today to announce we are moving the Andy Williams... No, I'm not announcing that. We're not doing that.

But we're grateful because I know many organizations and churches that have been struggling during this season. I've visited a lot of churches over the past year that went into the pandemic with high debt and large staffs and this has been a very difficult season for them as they've laid off staff, as they've had to put so much money, that could have been used in ministry, into buildings they are no longer using. I mean it has been a challenge.

I am grateful, Woodland Hills, for your stewardship and for the commitment you have made and how you've continued to give offerings that are above budget every week which allows us to do Care for Kids, which allows us to do the summer feeding program in Haiti for all the kids in school, that allows us to support camps in Tanzania. I know Bob and Dee were grateful for your ministry. From Indonesia, from international students on college campuses all across the country, there is so much that continues on and we want to encourage your generosity as we praise the Lord for what he has done here.

I've never said this before, but I think it would make sense right now for me to encourage all of you to consider Woodland Hills in your estate planning. Can I get an amen on that one right there? I have. I have plans if the Lord calls me home any time soon that Woodland Hills is a part of that. I just want to encourage your generosity as we... We don't know what the future holds. We don't know what next year looks like. We don't know how long we're going to be in this space, but how much more does God need to show us for us to know he is faithful and he has plans for us that we haven't even been able to comprehend yet, so thank you for that.

I also want to say thank you for your patience, especially at 10:00 am. I'll say it again. Thank you for your patience. COVID restrictions will probably be here for a while longer and we're doing the best we can to work through them. We know it can be challenging and frustrating for many of you sitting in other venues who wanted to sit in a different venue. We get that, but we just thank you for your patience with each other and with your church family.

I want to say thank you for your ministry to others. I love getting texts from people saying so and so just tested positive and we're taking groceries over. It's not something they have to call the church to figure how to do it; they're just doing the work of ministry. Someone texted me yesterday and said, "I'm working with people right now and serving them and taking care of families." That is going on in this church and in this community all over, thank you for that.

Lastly, I want to say thank you for your prayers. Continue to pray for one another. In the first service as well as in this service, I see many who have recovered from COVID and for that we are grateful. Our prayers continue to go out for those of you at home. There are many who are staying home because of quarantine. You've recovered. Many of you are staying home because you tested positive recently. We also know we have many watching right now who have lost family to this. We are called as a church to mourn with those who mourn, so we mourn with you today as well. Our prayers go to you and we will continue to pray for one another.

The reason we did *The Great Race* series and have talked so much about endurance and commitment is because we set in a little bit with the fatigue in this. Many of us in the early stages of the pandemic were saying things like, "I don't know" over and over again. I've never said *I don't know* more in my life than all the way through summer. But for some, it's moved from "I don't know" to "I don't care." I'm speaking with people, we're ministering to people who are ready to throw in the towel. They are ready to throw in the towel on businesses that they've tried to keep going throughout all this. They are ready to throw in the towel on jobs and walk away from jobs.

I just spoke this weekend with a couple ready to throw in the towel on their marriage. I'm grateful that they have scheduled a marriage intensive for January, after the holidays. People are ready to throw in the towel on relationships. I see it all the time on social media; people saying *if you don't do this, if you don't believe this, if you are not acting this way, I'm done with you, unfriend me*. People are saying *I'm done with this relationship*. They are throwing in the towel on relationships. Today, we're talking about the race that we, as followers of Jesus, are not called to throw in the towel on. We're not going to quit; we're going to keep running.

Here's the passage that we've been using through this series – 2 Timothy 4: 6-8. And just like you would pour out this offering on the ground or on the altar, the Apostle Paul is saying, **6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.** He's not talking about leaving a city, he's not talking about continuing on in a missionary journey; he's talking about his death. His time upon this earth is coming to an end.

And then he uses these two great word pictures. **7 I have fought the good fight...** And I'm going to bring boxing into this a little bit today. **...I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness...** This is a crown; it's a reward given for endurance, for commitment, for those believers who have longed for his appearing. I want to make it very clear. Today, he is not talking about salvation, the gift of salvation. He's talking about a reward for believers who endure. **...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.**

Commentator J. Hampton Keathley, III describes the crown of righteousness this way. *"The Crown of Righteousness is a reward given for faithfulness to use our gifts and opportunities in the service of the Lord and for loving His appearing."* He goes on to say, *"What are we going to do with these crowns?"* The casting of crowns... For some of you that's your favorite group. *"Because Christ alone is worthy,"* he says, *"and because we can only be fruitful when we abide in him."* So ultimately Jesus is our ultimate reward, but we're talking about the reward that we receive today for endurance and not quitting on this race. *"When we abide him, allowing his life to fill ours, we will all cast our crowns whatever we receive, before him in recognition that all we have done is by his grace and for his glory."*

What Paul is speaking of today in the race is this, and here's the race marked out for you. **Your race begins the moment you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and it ends the moment you die.** It ends the moment you take your final breath or the Lord returns.

In Psalm 90: 10, the race is described as 70 years upon this earth, 80 if you're strong, but those years are filled with sorrow and anguish. Meaning this race is going to look different at different times. The goal for us today is that we get to the finish line without quitting. We keep running, we keep fighting. We have purpose in what we're doing.

The race – set out for you and set out for me – is going to have **uphill climbs**. 2020 has been an uphill climb full of fatigue. There are going to be moments of **downhill jogs**. Adam and Shay both shared that they've done one marathon and that was it. Had I known them earlier, they wouldn't have even done that one marathon; I would have been able to talk them out of that marathon pretty quickly. Travis Brawner has done five marathons. I'm the only teaching team member who has never done a marathon. You're going, "Really?"

It's going to have **mountain tops** and it's going to have **valleys**. It's going to have long stretches, **plateaus**. There are going to be times **people are cheering you on** through fulfilling your calling and using your gifts and serving and ministering. People are going to be cheering, but there are going to be plenty of **lonely stretches** as well. Through the woods, through the desert. You can guarantee your race is going to have plenty of **rocky trails**.

The tension for us today... And we see it. If you've been in church for any length of time, you know there are some Christians... not all, but some Christians give it all in early miles of the race, but quit before the finish line. They give it all. They become new believers and they are on fire, they're ready to go; they're sharing their faith. They're with other believers every opportunity they get. They are studying the Bible morning, noon, and night. They're running hard.

I asked Travis early on and Adam mentioned it in the first part of this series. I said, "Travis, if the pandemic were a marathon, what mile are we on?" He said, "We're probably in mile 16 to 20. Ted, mile 20 is when most people hit the wall." So, you're either throwing in the towel or your hitting the wall. He said, "That's why that fatigue has set in and that's why people need to be encouraged."

I think there are three reasons why people quit before they get to the finish line. We're going to focus mainly on the third one today, but just to talk about these first two briefly. **Some quit because they think they are finished.** They think the race is over for them. My encouragement for you this morning is simply this: don't mistake milestones as the finish line. Milestones are something we can celebrate, but sometimes Christians look these milestones as finish lines. In other words, the finish line is not your graduation. If you've ever been to a graduation, they are typically saying this is the start for you.

The race we're talking about today is at the moment of your salvation. Mom and Dad, I hate to tell you, but the finish line is not when your last child leaves home. They say it costs \$268,000.00 to raise a kid from zero to 18. Some of you have four kids; you're millionaires. I'll bet you didn't even know that. But you celebrate when that last kid leaves home and it's a great milestone; we love milestone, but they're not finish lines.

For some, it's retirement. The first service got very nervous at first on this point, but I'm here to tell you that retirement from a job is great and we'll celebrate that and we will be part of eating the sheet cake with you, but it is not the finish line of your race. I feel we need to say that even clearer because we live in this town called Branson, Missouri. Listen, all my Treasure lake friends, I love you. Enjoy your camper, spend time there. Is anybody here from treasure Lake? They're usually in the first service because they are up at like 4:00. I love the Treasure Lake family. Retire and enjoy your retirement, but you your race is far from over.

You saw at the CMA awards with Brett Aiken and Reba McEntire and Chris Tomlin. I love this lyric in the song they sang. "Yeah, you only get one go around because the finish line is six feet in the ground." But we believe what Jesus said. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life, and you will live even though you die." The finish line is not these milestones.

Some quit due to injury. Some quit due to other runners. Have you ever known anybody that quit their race because of something that was said that they got offended by? I get letters like this all the time. Something was said up here that just set them off the wrong way and they are gone. Sometimes they are injured. People get hurt and sometimes they let that injury take them out for the long haul. We'll talk about that more in just a second.

Here's what we're really focusing on today. Some quit because they didn't train. We're going to see today in 1 Corinthians 9 this idea of the race. If you have your bibles, turn to 1 Corinthians 9. We're going to jump into verse 24. **24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run...** Now, Corinthians readers would really understand this word picture of a race because they had Isthmian games. They were biennial games that took place in Corinth. Part of these games included an endurance race. The endurance race required 10 months of mandatory training. You didn't complete the training? You didn't compete in the race. So, they can get into this word picture that the apostle Paul was going to share with them as he compares the endurance race to our faith and to life upon this earth.

**...but only one gets the prize?** As we are going to see today, this prize – the crown – is available for all, endurance for all. I want to make it clear again what we're talking about. We're not talking about the gift of salvation. We're talking about the reward for endurance.

**Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.**

John Piper compares these two. I love his illustration. He says, *"The serious athlete doesn't just ask how to get by in training. Mohamad Ali, when once asked about training, he started off by saying, "I hate every single minute of my training." So, why do we train? What's the point of training? "He asks what will bring about maximum performance." That's why we train. "So, the mature Christian asks, what will make me more useful for the kingdom? What will stir up my zeal for God most?"*

This year, I've been spending a lot of time encouraging couples at events with this: Marital satisfaction depends on factors and skills couples can do something about in any season or stage of life. Right now, we are in a very difficult season. A lot of times, we just want out of the season. "That's how we're going to get through, and our marriage will get better once we're out of this season." I tell them I can't do anything for the season that they are in. How about the stage of life? I said if you came today with a three-year-old, a five-year-old, and a seven-year-old, you're going home to a three-year-old, a five-year-old, and a seven-year-old. I can't change your stage, but what we can do is look at the factors and skills necessary to experience high levels of marital satisfaction in any season or stage.

I was at First Baptist Dallas a few hours before the event and autocorrect got ahold of it... I was able to stop the tweet before I made the mistake I made in Arizona once where I told people to come to a fun date night and autocorrect sent out "where we are going to be discovering the six levels of communism." I was able to delete that tweet. At First Baptist Dallas, I was about to tweet out "Hey, join us tonight where we will be looking at the factors and skills necessary to achieve high levels of marijuana satisfaction." If you type m-a-r-i in your phone, you'll know that all the developers for your phone are in Colorado because the first thing that comes up is marijuana. I had it all typed out, but I always read it back. I read, "to achieve high levels of marijuana satisfaction." And then I said, "Let's roll!" I deleted that tweet immediately.

In this season and stage, I don't know how useful it is for you or for me to sit here and figure out how we get out of it. What about asking what will make us most useful in this season? What will bring our zeal up for the Lord? How can we learn and how can we grow through this difficult time?

It's really the difference between a casual Christian and a committed Christian. Do you know what the difference is between a casual and a committed Christian? Strict training. Someone who is preparing for this race. Someone who is on guard in this race. Someone who is not even thinking about throwing in the towel. If there is something I'm missing to make my race continue, if there is something I'm missing to bring more glory to God, if there's something I'm missing to stir my zeal for the Lord, then I must start training again for that.

Here's what we know about this race. This race is not a competition with one another. I don't feel one ounce of need to compete with our friends at Bloom Church, with our friends at First Baptist Branson, with our friends at First Presbyterian Church. Why? Because we're all runners in the same race. Here's what I know. That means, for me, as I'm thinking about the passion and pursuit that Paul had to live out his calling, I'm going to stay in my lane and cheer you on as you run. We're not used to that. Someone runs alongside me or maybe gets ahead of me it's like *how do I get ahead of them?* No. We're called to cheer each other on in this race. I know what I'm supposed to be doing. I know what God has called me to do. Do you know what you're called to do? Do you know what your race includes? Don't let another runner take you out of the race. Don't let another runner say something or do something that causes injury in you and you're done and you're just going to quit.

Here's what your race includes – some things you need to think about with strict training. Do you know your calling? Do you know what the Lord has placed in you to complete in this race? Do you know your spiritual gifts that were given to you at the moment of your salvation? Are you in training to discover those? Have you been disciplined in those? Do you know what they are? Do you know how to lean into them? Do you know how to find other runners or other voices to speak into your life, helping you to discover what your spiritual gifts are?

God has given you a unique personality. As your pastor, I can say some of you have been given a very, very interesting personality, but it's for God's glory. How are you going to use it? How about your passions? There are people in here passionate about marriage, people passionate in here about fostering and adoption. There are people passionate in here about the unborn. There are people passionate about youth and young adults. Passions are different for each person, but this is the lane that you've been given. You have experience. You have life experience. How are you leveraging that? Rather than just saying I did this, and I'll just put it aside, and I'm just going to kind of coast downhill the rest of my race. But how are you using your experience and leveraging that for God's glory in ministering to other people? And your abilities.

Jerry Falwell, the founder of Liberty University... Amy and I heard it every single Wednesday, coming into Chapel. He would speak every Wednesday and his favorite thing to call us was young champions for Christ. He would always start off with Young Champions! It was a pep talk almost every week. He'd go, "I don't care what field you are going into. I don't care what job you are taking. But when you step foot in that door, you will be a champion for Christ. If you are a nurse, you walk into that hospital every day as a champion for Christ. If you are in construction, you walk onto that construction site every day a champion for Christ. If you are an accountant, a lawyer, whatever it is you're called to do, do it as a champion for Christ. And that's why he says "Liberty exists... We're training up Champions for Christ." We were in strict training.

I had to use this illustration because I think most of us relate to it. If you've not watched them, you've got some catching up to do. We can all go back to the moment of Rocky I. You remember he's a scrappy fighter. He trained himself. He was alone, but he was running. We all have wanted to do that moment of running up the stairs, getting to the top, and cheering. They have the Rocky statue on street level in Philadelphia. I don't know why. You can get your picture with it. But you can still run the stairs.

Then we know in Rocky I and Rocky II, he takes on Apollo Creed. He doesn't win in the first one, but he trains just as hard in the second one and we know the outcome of that. He becomes the world champion. Then it all fell apart in Rocky III. Things got weird in Rocky III. We all can admit it got very weird in Rocky III. The main theme of Rocky III was training and the fact that Rocky got lazy. You have to admit.

He went out of the neighborhood and the neighborhood gym and he went to this posh hotel. They are selling shirts, bubbles, and they've got a live band. When Rocky is doing reps, he's just really... A girl comes over and asks for a kiss and he says, "Oh, sure." He pauses in a workout to get a kiss! He's posing for pictures. And who gets ticked off? Micky. Micky is frustrated. He's mad the whole time. A little bubble comes floating down and Micky pops it, he was just mad. He's telling Rocky the whole time, "Let's go back to the gym! We've got to get back to the gym and get back to real workouts and strict training."

The whole time, who's he getting ready for? Clubber Lang. And Clubber Lang is in the basement with Joe Biden. Stop it. Stop laughing at that. Are we okay with political humor yet or no? Too soon? Clubber Lang is doing the training of Rocky I and Rocky II. Rocky loses. If you've not seen the movie, Micky passes away and it's a rough time. Rocky's head is not right. He just can't train. Who enters in? Apollo Creed steps back into Rocky III. You remember the scene. Rocky's not giving it his all. His head is not in the game. Apollo gets to the end... Apollo is in great shape. Apollo turns around and starts yelling at Rocky, "WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU! WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?" And then it clicks, and Rocky begins strict training again. We know how the story ends. Rocky takes out Clubber Lang.

I'm just wondering for many of us here. For those of you who are ready to throw in the towel, I'm just telling you it's time to get back in the gym. It's time to get back to strict training.

***26 Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly...*** Meaning I'm running with purpose. I'm fulfilling my calling. I'm using my spiritual gifts. I'm using my experience. I'm using my passions. I'm using the abilities that God has given me and I'm going to run and I'm going all the way to the finish line; I'm not stopping at the milestones. ***I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. 27 No, 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...*** The word there actually means *disapproved ...for the prize*. My encouragement for many of you is to get back into the gym.

For those of you at home watching right now, this is going to be a time of pause and reflect for all of us. I want to encourage you, if your staying home because of the virus, because of underlying healthy conditions, from the very beginning until right now, we honor all decisions and we continue to honor that.



There are many of you who are staying home and yet you're doing everything else. I just want to encourage you to get back into the gym. Get back into strict training. This race has come to a place of fatigue and many of you are hitting the wall and many of you are disconnecting from biblical community. You haven't read your Bible in months, you haven't fellowshiped with other believers, you're just trying to ride it out. I can't encourage you enough to get back into the gym.

We always look at this through the five purposes of the church. For many, you have to get back to **worship**. If you're watching this on demand and you haven't watched a service for months, I can't encourage you enough to begin worshipping again with your church family.

Find creative ways to **fellowship**, to get back into the gym with fellowship, fellowshiping with one another, connecting with one another. These are the five purposes of our church, these are the five purposes of your life.

**Discipleship.** We see this happen all the time when it comes to a new Bible study that people want to attend. Bible studies start off so strong and they are packed. We have waiting lists for the Bible studies in the Growth Gatherings that we do. But we know how it works. By the end of the Growth Gathering or by the end of the Bible Study, we're typically down to about 50% of where we started. Don't just get back to the gym, stay in the gym. Continue to know what it means to be more like Jesus. Grow in your knowledge of the Word and allow the life of Jesus, the words of Jesus, the teaching of scripture to become part of your life in your family.

**Ministry.** Some of you need to get back to not just caring for you and your family, and you need to start buying toilet paper for other people. Try that. When toilet paper was on ration the first time (I guess we're headed back there again), the only ones I could find were single rolls that you see stacked up in hotel rooms and they're not really good on the hind end, if you know what I mean. They are a little scratchy, I'm just going to say it. I bought as many as I could anyway, and I would just drive by random member's homes and roll down window and throw it out onto their front yard. That's a benevolent, generous church, right? One roll of toilet paper from a hotel. They were probably thinking, *He stole this from a hotel*. No, I bought that. The lotions and the shampoos I stole from the hotel.

But you need to get back to not just thinking about yourself. Some of you are ready to throw in the towel because since March, you've been consumed with yourself. You're not using your gifts and your passions and your experience to serve other people. You want to fast track in this race? You want to get running again? Think of somebody else, serve somebody else besides yourself.

**Evangelism.** Do you remember the early miles of your race when you became a believer? You were telling every family member and every friend about the Lord? Where is that passion now? Where's that zeal now? Get that stirred back up to where you're serving.

As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, ***58 Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.***

The passion of this church, the goal of this church is we want you to start well, and we want you to finish well. We want you to long for his appearing and live in light of it. That's our prayer for you, that you won't throw in the towel.

I've been encouraging couples right now because I get a lot of calls and messages from couples who are ready to quit and throw in the towel. Again, this is pastorally just the way I've tried to handle it. I know when I'm emotional, it's just not a good time to make major decisions for my life. I know late at night is not a good time for me to make decisions for my life.

I've worked with some couple who are ready to throw in the towel. I'm just telling them that right now, with the fatigue setting in from this, you need to continue to run your race, spend more time focusing on what your spiritual gifts are, what your passions are, what your experiences are, what is laid out before you. I'm going to cheer on the runners that are running alongside me and I'm going to find a way to continue to run, to continue to serve. Spend less time focused on how you can change your spouse and more time focused on running your race. I think this can be applied to so any places where people are wanting to quit, and people are wanting to give up.

Let me pray over you and let you know the prayer team will be down front, care pastors will be down front. Whatever you're considering throwing the towel in on, if you're considering quitting this race, giving up on this race, don't leave here today without finding someone to pray with, to be encourage with. Connect with us online. We would love to encourage you as well.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we thank you for the race that you have set before us and may we run it, may we leverage everything from abilities to experience, the spiritual gifts that you have placed within us. May we run with these, use these, serve with these. May we go into strict training for those areas that we need to learn more about. May we grow and be disciplined in these areas.

I pray as we go into the Christmas season... It can already be a lonely time for many; now add to it those who are not able to be with or spend time with family because of the virus. I pray comfort for them. For those who are mourning, this church family mourns with them. For those who are sick, we pray for their healing and their speedy recovery from this.

We thank you for what you continue to do in this church. You have been faithful, you will continue to be faithful, and as you were with us yesterday, you will be with us today, and as you're with us today, you will be with us tomorrow, proving yourself faithful. For that, we are grateful

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.