

Run the Race

What constitutes your reservoir of strength when life is hard and your stamina is weakened? I often find renewed



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strength in my family, a succession of people not notable for wealth or fame, but admirable for their sense of duty, strong work ethic and sound thinking. They came to the New World from England, Germany and Norway to find a new life in America. They were people of dignity who earned their way and believed in God. Their faith was never showy, but it was firm. Their strength has become my strength. So, when the writer of Hebrews moves from the rich theological images of the Old Testament to hard-hitting words of encouragement to those early Christ-followers, my pulse beats a little faster and I want back in the race.

The writer's synopsis of faith in all its strength and courage begins with Moses, who had the incredible opportunity to lead his enslaved nation to freedom and a whole new identity. Read the full story in Exodus. The slave baby who, despite being raised by the Egyptian king's daughter and possessing every advantage and potential for power, chose to identify with his own people. "Chose" is the operative word. Moses' conscious choice came after his murder of an Egyptian slave master and exile in the wilderness of Midian, where God spoke to him out of a burning bush (Exodus 3). Moses is described as choosing "to share ill-treatment with the people of God than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:25).

A repeating theme in Hebrews is that God's people will face hardship and enmity, but God cares for and rewards those who believe and serve him. The writer sees the entire Old Testament as an unfolding epic of God reaching out to us, which is powerfully concluded with the coming of Christ. He even describes Moses "suffering for Christ" (v. 26). Remembering Moses opens the floodgate in a tumble of powerful images: "what more should I say...for time will fail me," followed by references to "Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets who through faith accomplished heroic deeds" (vv. 32-34). He offers a glimpse of their suffering, including fire, war, torture, poverty and every form

of indignity. It is a rapid stream of Old Testament stories that resonates with his readers, a voluminous record of God's faithfulness in Israel's history.

Do not miss the powerful encouragement in that list. In spite of the tragedies those Old Testament saints experienced, he points out they "through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign enemies to flight" (vv. 33-34). It all reminds me of how small my problems seem in comparison. I have lived and traveled outside the United States; when I hear people in our country talk about how hard it is to live for Christ and that church is no longer respected, I wish I could explain how easy our lives are compared to the majority of this world. Living the Christian life is not always easy, but this powerful New Testament letter reminds us that in the strength of Christ we can overcome every challenge.

Those Old Testament saints, the recipients of this letter and those who serve Christ today have the promise "since God provided something better, so that they could not apart from us be made perfect" (v. 40). The hope we have in God has never, nor will it ever, be taken from us! Remember, because "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and 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" (12:1-2).

I ran cross country track in high school, so this image resonates with me. I was not good at any of the usual sports but I could run. I had a tough coach who loved kids and motivated them. He taught me some valuable lessons for living: keep your eye on the goal; never look back; nothing anyone else does matters, so focus on your run; never give up, because winning is more than getting to the goal first. You can learn from others, but the result is your responsibility!

One really powerful reason to study Scripture is to find inspiration in those who have gone before us, to discover that in spite of personal failure and the pitfalls of life, God will bless and guide you. Jesus knew none of his disciples were perfect from the beginning. God knows me and

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Scripture: Hebrews 11:24-26, 32; 12:2

you from the inside out. Yet, here we are in this race called the Christian life – hurting, tired, confused, unhappy and trying to keep running.

This is not the first race. Look back at the generations of God's people. Learn from their struggles and victories. None of them were any more perfect than you. They were not insulated from heartache or obstacles. Look at how God loved them, forgave and gave them new opportunities, and pointed them to the goal of his grace and kingdom beyond this world. Read some of those colorful Old Testament stories. Study Jesus' life and teachings.

We are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses," almost as if the grandstands of heaven are crowded with those who have gone before us. They are on their feet cheering. They know the end and who wins. They know by their own experiences how hard it can be to stay strong and finish the race.

A significant part of the Christian life is self-examination. Bible study must be more than gathering facts and memorizing verses. Running a race involves both physical and emotional preparation. Living as a Christian involves the whole person, particularly opening heart and mind to God, seeking to grow in spiritual depth and daily living out your faith. What motivates you? How do you relate to others? What are your core values? The Bible, as the writer of Hebrews demonstrates, can have a powerful influence on your understanding and living as a child of God. God's Spirit will help you apply the Bible to your living.

Hebrews is all about encouragement, which we all need. As many times as the Old Testament reveals the failures and rebellion of God's people, the story always moves to God's forgiveness and hope for a new beginning. Keep your eyes on the goal, no matter how difficult the race. James 1:12 echoes Hebrews: "Blessed is a person who perseveres under trial: for once he/she has been approved, he/she will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him." Keep running the race – you will not be disappointed.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.