Preparing to Finish Well (Heb. 11:35b-12:6)

**Introduction:** Joseph. Steven. Saul. Cain. Naomi. Job. Solomon. Elijah. So many names fill the pages of the Bible. Each name has a story. Some of them ended well; others ended in heartache.

Solomon wisely asked God for discernment and built a magnificent temple as a place of worship. His ability to understand the world around him gained him wealth, peace, accomplishments, and women…lots of women. His life was full. The words of his final book tell of his eventual emptiness, bitterness, and regret.

Naomi knew bitterness too. She blamed God for taking away her husband and her boys. But God gave her Ruth. The last image we have is of her holding her grandson as she marvels at the blessing of God.

Did Solomon or Naomi finish well? I guess that depends on your perspective.

Steven was one of the first seven deacons, chosen to serve food to widows. He went beyond his original job description and worked to meet spiritual needs along with physical ones. It got him in trouble, not because he was running his race unlawfully, but because he was listening to a different Coach. His struggle ended when a final stone delivered the death blow.

Some would feel sorrow over the waste. Others would find motivation in the sacrifice. Did he finish well?

What does it mean to finish well? What are the requirements? Who has the authority to evaluate a race’s end, and on what basis do they judge? I’m running my race right now; so are you. I don’t want to run in vain (1 Cor. 9:26-27). I want to make sure I’m running the right way, toward the right goal with the right people.

Let’s take a look at what the Bible has to say about our finish. I challenge you to run this race well and to work together as a team. Then we, like others (2 Tim. 4:6-8), will arrive at our destination with confidence and expectation.

1. Finishing well requires the ability to see beyond the finish line. – *“so that they might obtain a better resurrection”* (Heb. 11:35)

Can you see the future? You accept that your employer will not keep you on the payroll indefinitely, so you hire an investment counselor to manage your assets in the hope of a comfortable retirement. You know that no matter how valuable you are to the team, the time will come when your athletic skills will diminish. So you finish your degree. You make preparations for the future even if you don’t know its specifics.

Successful coaches and their teams consistently strategize five plays ahead of the one currently in motion. They plan as if what they envision is actually going to happen. People of faith do the same thing, but they do so based on a surer foundation.

The subject of Hebrews 11 is faith – faith that is grounded in the promises of God. The chapter first defines faith…

*“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”* (Heb. 11:1)

*…*and then gives us case studies to show us how different characters applied faith to their situations. In most cases, these faith characters accomplished a tangible result. Noah built a boat. Israel crossed the Red Sea. Sarah produced a son. Rahab hid spies.

For some of them though, they didn’t express their faith by *doing* something but by releasing their grip on something. Abraham left Ur at God’s command. He was willing to sacrifice Isaac for the same reason. Moses forsook Egypt to identify with slaves. Why? These actions didn’t make sense.

In Ur, Abraham would have inherited land and the thriving trading partnerships his family had nurtured. Instead, he became a nomad and had to establish new relationships in unfamiliar territory. Isaac was the fulfillment of God’s promise and the confidence of a future for Abraham’s family. God required Isaac as a sacrifice. Moses, by all accounts, had arrived – the Jewish boy destined for death but fated for the palace. He chose suffering over security. Why were they willing to give up what many would consider to be the finish line?

None of these knew exactly what the finish line looked like, but they knew what others presented to them as the goal wasn’t it. It wasn’t about being comfortable or rich or popular. The finish line went much further than that. They also recognized that there was something beyond the completion of their task and that what they did now was going to affect their existence then.

That’s where most people struggle. They think the finish line is the enjoyment of the immediate pleasure or escape from the imminent pain. They’re not considering the future.

She can feel the calming effect of the nicotine, but she can’t fathom the anxiety not being able to catch your breath produces. The alcohol frees them from their inhibitions and makes them laugh, but the sorrow and shame of a drunken death on the way home will bind them to their foolishness. A sexual encounter will provide him with a momentary connection, but it will deepen the divide between him and his wife. People of faith aren’t like this. They see farther.

Abraham left civilization behind because he saw a city in front of him hovering over the sand (Heb. 11:16). It was no desert mirage. It was more real to him than anything he left behind.

Abraham could also see a son in his arms twenty-five years before it happened. God had promised him he would be the father of nations, not the father of one. His son was a step in the right direction, but his son wasn’t the finish line. That’s what enabled Abraham to sacrifice his son (Heb. 11:17). He could see beyond his son’s death to his resurrection (Heb. 11:18).

What do you see as your finish line?

Do you see the finish line as your death? Is that your last day, or do you see what comes after that – your resurrection? The people God speaks of in Hebrews 11:35 saw resurrection. They saw it happen *for other people*. When resurrection didn’t happen for them, they didn’t get angry. Doing so would have been nearsighted of them.

They decided resurrection back to their current existence or even release from their present pain was not the goal God had given them. They wanted something more; it was distant, but faith made it visible. They wanted a resurrection that would bring them into the presence of God (Phil. 3:10-11).

1. Finishing well doesn’t always mean finishing smoothly. *– “destitute, afflicted, ill-treated…”* (Heb. 11:36-38)

The final marathon runner in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics was John Stephen Akhwari from Tanzania. He completed his race a full hour after the winner crossed the finish line. The medals ceremony had already begun when he entered the virtually empty stadium.

Less than halfway into the race, a collision between him and other runners caused his fall and injury. His dislocated and bloodied knee made it impossible for him to continue at his normal pace. Though no one would have questioned his withdrawal, he chose to move forward. Eighteen others in the race eventually did give up.

After those remaining in the stands stopped cheering for Akhwari, they asked him, despite his pain and the hopelessness of winning, why he continued. He said, “My country did not send me 5000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5000 miles to finish the race.”[[1]](#endnote-1) He limped over the finish line, but he crossed it.

Glorious stories fill the pages of the Bible. Daniel in the lion’s den. David and Goliath. Joshua and the Israelites against the walls of Jericho. We love those stories. That’s probably why they get told so often. We envision ourselves being there and being them. It’s not hard to hear the roar of the Israelites, David’s defiant challenge, or even Daniel’s calm reassurance to King Darius.

*“Then David said to the Philistine, ‘…I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted.This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands…that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.’”* (1 Sam. 17:45-46)

*“Then Daniel spoke to the king, ‘O king, live forever! My God sent His angel and shut the lions’ mouths and they have not harmed me...’”* (Dan. 6:21-22)

Did you know that some of the best biblical stories end with a barely-audible whisper rather than a victorious shout? Joshua boldly and forcefully challenged the Israelites with his “choose you this day” speech. But then he headed off into oblivion to die the death of an old man. The Bible doesn’t even record Daniel’s death. Better that than the record of David’s last days. He ends his reign as a weak old man who can’t keep warm (1 Kings 1:1) and who is easily manipulated because of his fragile grasp on kingdom happenings (1 Kings 1:11-14).

I don’t want to sound sacrilegious here, but Jesus’ story also looks pretty wimpy at the end. His followers deserted Him, His enemies tortured Him mercilessly, He refused to speak up for Himself, and He died a criminal’s death. Jesus couldn’t even carry His own cross over the finish line. Yes, He yelled out “Tetelestai! (It is finished)” with His last breath, but then He gave up. As a final insult, He had to borrow a tomb.

Most of the stories in Hebrews 11 tell of bold acts of obedience from weak people resulting in exhilarating outcomes. Near the end of the chapter (Heb. 11:35-38), God’s Spirit inspires the author to tell stories of a different sort of hero. He doesn’t give their names. We probably wouldn’t recognize the names if the author gave them.

The only foes they defeat are their personal demons. They suffered horribly both in their living conditions and the methods of their deaths. Angels did not usher them into Heaven as they peacefully slept. They limped across the finish line.

As much as I would like to identify with the glorious stories, it is far easier for me to identify with the anonymous ones. If God blesses me, I’ll die before all the people who knew me do, before my strength or my memory is gone, and while I can still wipe my own buttocks. I have no guarantees.

How many battered, bruised, and bleeding saints struggle just to make it to the end? Lonely, penniless, unappreciated, and anonymous. Unknown to the world and seemingly forgotten by God. He’s the patient in bed number two, room 37. The nurse may know his name but not his story. Don’t blame the nurse. The saint can’t remember these details either.

Most warriors would rather die in battle facing an enemy they can see instead of cancer within them. Somehow, the pain would be easier to bear. They’re not in this terrible position because of some rule they broke. They competed lawfully; they ran their race with integrity (2 Tim. 2:5).

John the prophet understood the frustration of running a good race only to face an uneventful end. He would have rather died from a soldier’s arrow than the executioner’s blade. No one wants to end that way.

But that’s the point; death is not the finish line! Resurrection’s coming! It came for Jesus; it will come for me.

Maybe I won’t be able to shout out “Tetelestai!” with my last breath, but Jesus will do the shouting for me when He returns (1 Thess. 4:16). Maybe no one on earth sings my accomplishments, but Jesus knows my name; He recorded it in His book (Mal. 3:16-18). I might not finish my race *with* grace, but I will finish it *because of* grace.

It matters not what others think of my story. It only matters what God thinks of me.

1. Finishing well gets you affirmation from God. – *“of whom the world was not worthy”* (Heb. 11:38)

The Bible records the pleasure of God with His Son at least two times. The first time was at Jesus’ baptism.

*“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”* (Matt. 3:17)

By that point in Jesus’ life, He had accomplished nothing significant enough to distinguish Him from any other Galilean. He had displayed obedience, not divinity.

The second occurrence of God’s stated affirmation was on top of a mountain. Three holy men (Jesus, Moses, and Elijah) stood opposite three stupefied men (Peter, James, and John). Peter suggested they stay there so they could hear more of the conversation their sleep had stolen. The Father pointed them back to Jesus.

*“This is my beloved Son, listen to Him!”* (Mark 9:7)

Later in the biblical record, John (one of the participants in the previous event) saw Jesus typified as a sacrificial lamb. He hears the inhabitants of Heaven echo the statement of the early church.

*“For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Phil. 2:9-11)

Both because of Who He is and what He’s done, Jesus is worthy (Rev. 5:13-14).

It does not surprise me that Jesus received validation from His Father. What Father wouldn’t love to claim Jesus as his son? Whatever the son does reflects back on the father. The reflection Jesus provided was breathtaking.

The reflection the rest of humanity gives tends to hide God’s glory instead of manifesting it. Though weak, mankind has moments where we allow the light to shine through. Moses’ parents hid him in the shadows and the blackness of a basket. Their actions brought light.

Humanity had almost extinguished the light by the time Noah fathered three boys and built an ark to rescue them. To his family and to his friends, Noah preached righteousness. Most chose to stay in their wickedness. These sons of God stood alone as torches in the night.

Still, the words God uses to describe them are scandalous.

*“Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.”* – Heb. 11:16

*“Of whom the world was not worthy”* – Heb. 11:38

How could God call a human “worthy?” How could a holy God *not* be ashamed of His sinful children? Adam and Eve and all their descendants have been desperately trying to conceal their nakedness in His presence.

It’s no surprise that Jonathan chose to connect himself with David right after Goliath’s beheading (1 Sam. 18:1). But why would God choose to do so? What about all that could possibly impress Him?

I can see the author of Hebrews with an unsteady hand, struggling to write these words even as God’s Spirit inspired him to do so. “Is that really what you want me to write? Did I hear you correctly? ‘Worthy.’ ‘Not ashamed.’” And then I can see him as he puts down his quill. He reads what he just penned, his eyes fill with water, and his hands rise toward Heaven as he realizes the implication of the words on the page.

God claims me! God considers me worthy. He is willing to be identified with, seen with, and connected with me. The same is true for all Jesus’ followers. You might question that statement.

You know what it is to be embarrassed by some of your associations. Worse, you know all the reasons Jesus rightly has to hide His connection to you. The same was true for each of the biblical characters. The author of Hebrews knew their frailties just as well as he knew their strengths.

Abraham, due to a lack of faith, impregnated a servant girl and eventually dismissed her from his home. Noah successfully overcame water but fell under the power of a different liquid, wine. In an attempt to cover up his indiscretion, David killed one of his protectors and added his wife to the harem. Dark spots. They all had them.

None of them had as many dark spots as Samson (Heb. 11:32). His self-inflicted bruises covered so much of his soul, it was difficult to find something to praise. God did not claim him because of his effectiveness. Samson did not finish the mission God gave him (Judges 13:5).

Though Samson was the strongest man who ever lived, his strength did not impress God. The source of Samson’s strength *was* God (Judges 14:6). Unfortunately, he did not rely on God for power over his lust for women. The beauty and pleasure he permitted himself led to his capture, blindness, pain, and death.

So why does God include Samson’s story? At the end of his life, he expressed faith in God’s existence and God’s goodness (Heb. 11:6; Judges 16:30). From all these stories, I learn something.

God is impressed with faith, not accomplishment. God didn’t include their stories because of what they did or how well they did it but why they did it. They believed God. Their faith led to their faithfulness, not their perfection.

Jesus said He would claim all who claimed Him (Matt. 10:32-33). We all have days when we give the Accuser multiple rounds of ammunition he can use to embarrass God. Even Job, whom God touted in front of Satan like any proud father would (Job 1:8), eventually showed his underbelly. God still claimed him (Job 42:7).

Knowing that God affirms me for finishing the race with faith even if I don’t finish it with finesse motivates me to run well. I want to legitimize His pride rather than give others a reason to question it.

1. Finishing well demands that we work as a team. – *“apart from us, they would not be made perfect”* (Heb. 11:40)

There are some things you cannot do on your own. Running a race would seem to be one that you could. It wouldn’t be much fun. You could race against the clock, but who would be there to cheer you on, to challenge you, or to congratulate you? And who would pick you up and comfort you when you got hurt?

For all of these reasons, God has positioned us in a team. He is the team’s leader (Eph. 1:22), its source of energy (John 15:5; Acts 1:8), and its example (Heb. 12:3). Though we often act as if we can run the race without God’s help, our limited lucid moments force us to acknowledge our absolute dependence on Him. It is more difficult to admit how much we need each other.

Jesus gave us the ultimate example of teamwork. He gathered twelve apostles and hundreds of followers. He did what only He could do (“It is finished”) and then left the rest for them and us to complete. He does not need a team (then or now) to complete His mission, but we do.

In each of his letters, Paul acknowledged the financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual contributions people made in his ministry. He could not have finished his race well without God’s help or theirs. Just as the body needs the cooperation of multiple unique components to function well, so we depend on the strengths of others to shore up our weaknesses (1 Cor. 12:17-18). No one completes the race on their own.

Moses needed Aaron. Abraham and Sarah needed each other. No matter how much faith either of them had individually, neither could have produced Isaac on their own. Joseph could not reach Canaan without help. By the time the Israelites left Egypt, Joseph was long dead. He needed them to carry his bones to the Promised Land (Heb. 11:22).

What if you, like Joseph, reach your personal finish line before the mission is complete? It happened for Moses. He understood that sacrifice for the team was a necessity. The race might be yours, but the race is not about you. It’s about those who follow you, and it’s about Jesus who ran His race so you could run yours.

Think of the race you run as a relay. You run one leg of something much larger than yourself. The better you do your part, the easier the race is for others. They can’t run unless you do. What would have happened if Noah hadn’t picked up the baton! What about Mary, John the Apostle, Elijah, Joseph, or Ruth? Each of them had a pivotal role in the salvation story.

You too are a significant part of the chain, but you are only one link in it. Remembering that helps to deter pride. It also helps to keep us from fighting with one another. We win this race through cooperation, not competition.

At a Special Olympics event, some mentally handicapped boys were running a 220-yard race. One boy, Andrew, was much faster than the others. He was 50 yards ahead, nearing the finish line. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his friend fall.

Even though everyone at the finish line was yelling for Andrew to keep running, he stopped. He went back and helped his friend get up (Eccl. 4:9-12). If poor Andrew had just been as smart as us “normal” folks, he would have known he was supposed to win, not help his friend! He and his friend were both winners. They won by finishing in last place *together*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Sometimes you’ve got to ask yourself the question. Do I want to win, or do I want to have a friend? Andrew knew the right answer.

Since I am a part of a team, I can’t just be satisfied with how well I’m doing. I have to concern myself with the health of my squad (Gal. 6:1). That means praying for them, encouraging them, and lovingly warning them when their choices are creating danger for themselves and the group (Heb. 12:14-17).

1. Finishing well can be inhibited by distractions. *– “fixing our eyes on Jesus”* (Heb. 12:1-3)

If the race were the only thing happening, distractions would not be an issue. But it’s not, and they are. Anyone who’s ever been to a sporting event will tell you that focusing on the game can be difficult. Between the crowd, the concessions, the competitors, the cheerleaders, and the cymbals, remembering why you’re there takes real concentration.

Much of the time, the adults do more socializing than cheering. The young wannabees play just past the field until they are old enough to join the actual game. The PTA is too busy making sure they’ve cooked enough hot dogs for intermission to notice the score. The girls focus more on the players’ muscles than what down it is. The cheerleaders’ skimpy skirts give the benchwarmers something to dream about until the coach calls their name.

It’s okay for them to be distracted. They’re not in the game. You are.

Those in the stands have been on the field. They’ve run their race. The reason they are here is to encourage you to complete your race and take you home when your race is done (Heb. 12:1). But for now, you’ve got a job to do. Reach the goal line. Your job requires focus.

David knew the importance of focus,

*“One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”* (Psalm 27:4)

So did Paul,

*“One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* (Phil. 3:13-14)

Paul’s friends attempted to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem. They told him of the dangers awaiting him there. He heard their words and their heart, but he did not allow their reasoning to deter him from his mission (Acts 20:23-24).

It’s so easy to get distracted. Some of the distractions we face are sinful, but not all of them are. “Good” can turn our attention from “best” just as easily as evil can. We have to determine our mission. Then we must evaluate each component of our lives to see its potential to propel us toward our mission’s completion (1 Cor. 7:34-35). This will keep us on task.

Jesus is the ultimate example of focus. He was stubbornly resolved to do one thing.

*“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* (Luke 19:10)

Jesus came to rescue sinners. That’s it. Every activity, every teaching, every relationship, every encounter in His life was a part of that mission. He jettisoned whatever could have hindered Him including good things.

Satan tried to distract Him with bread, but Jesus had just spent the last forty days honing His focus through fasting and prayer (Matt. 4:2-3). Jesus was resolute about His need to go through Samaria (John 4:4). He didn’t allow social prejudices or physical weakness to stop Him from ministering to a woman beside a well. And when His disciples urged Him to eat the food they had acquired, Jesus refused their offer of a good thing. Instead, He turned their attention to the people who needed the Bread of Life (John 4:34-35).

After the feeding of the 5000, those who had eaten decided to make Jesus their king. Jesus didn’t bite. That was not His mission (yet), so He left (John 6:15). When Jesus informed the disciples of His plan to die, Peter had the gall to rebuke Him. In return, Jesus lectured Peter, “If you’re not going to run with Me, then get out of My way!” (Mark 8:32-33) Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem; nothing was going to stop Him! (Luke 9:51) His resolve got Him to His destination – the finish line (John 17:4; 19:30).

Jesus never lost His focus; we often lose ours. Doing so gets us into trouble. Peter, the same one who tried to distract Jesus allowed the wind and waves to distract him. He started to go down (Matt. 14:29-30). Though Peter took his eyes off Jesus, Jesus never removed His gaze from Peter. Jesus’ focus provided rescue for Peter from the water and salvation for all people from sin.

Now Jesus calls us to focus on Him as our goal and to follow His example. You were the prize that kept Him moving forward (“the joy set before Him”); He wants to be the treasure that motivates you (“fixing our eyes on Jesus” [Heb. 12:2]). That’s the key to focus. When the award at the finish line is more valuable to you than anything on the sidelines, focus will not be an issue (Ps. 73:25).

1. Finishing well is impossible for quitters. – *“do not grow weary and lose heart”* (Heb. 12:3)

As Paul was awaiting the executioner, he wrote of a former co-laborer whose defection left Paul feeling lonely.

*“Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me.”* (2 Tim. 4:10)

Abandonment by a friend bruised Paul, but it didn’t demoralize him. He still had Jesus at his side (2 Tim. 4:16-17). Jesus knew how betrayal felt. Near the end of Jesus’ life, Judas Iscariot quit. Jesus had prophesied both His apostles’ disloyalty as well as that of subsequent disciples (Matt. 24:12). So Paul was not surprised when he saw the people he loved loving things more than they loved God. Some people quit because of distractions (Gal. 5:7; 1 John 2:15).

Saul, the first king of Israel, was an example. He began his race well, moving quickly toward the goal right out of the starting block. His appreciation for his unworthiness to be in the race kept him listening to his Coach (1 Sam. 15:17). But the temporary rewards of his position and the possibility a competitor could take it from him (1 Sam. 18:8) caused him to finish his race badly (1 Sam. 31:8-10). He accused David of disloyalty, but Saul was the treasonous one. His pride distracted him.

Other people withdraw because of discouragement. If you quit in your head or your heart (Heb. 12:3), then any remaining movement forward will simply be a function of unsustainable momentum. Runners know a race is more mental than it is physical. The Enemy knows it too. He’ll try to mess with your thinking (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 10:5, Phil. 4:8). *He doesn’t need to trip you up if he can get you to stop on your own.*

Just because we see multitudes dropping out of the race doesn’t mean we have to follow their lead. True disciples endure to the end (Matt. 24:13). When others turned back from following Jesus, His tired disciples proclaimed their steadfastness. Jesus was the only One Who had what they needed - life (John 6:67-68) and rest (Matt. 11:29).

Rest may be what you need. Retreat is not renunciation. Jesus is not a harsh taskmaster. He knows our need for rest (Psalm 103:14). Just before Jesus and His disciples served food to over 5000 people, they had attempted to get away for some rest (Matt. 14:13; Mark 7:30-32). Running sometimes requires waiting (Isaiah 40: 28-31). Exhaustion increases the likelihood of our listening to the Enemy’s lies (Matt. 26:41).

Satan will work to convince you the costs Jesus requires are unfair and too high for what Jesus promises. He’ll belittle your contribution to the team. He’ll point out all your acquaintances who have withdrawn from the race and suggest you do the same. And he’ll remind you of how little progress you’ve made toward your goal.

Don’t look at how far you’ve come for your encouragement. Focus on the One at the end of the race. Listen to Him cheering you on.

Jesus will tell you your sacrifices are worth it and will produce abundant results (Gal. 6:9). Jesus will send others to strengthen your faith (1 Thess. 5:11, 14) and encourage you with the impact you have had on their race (Phil. 4:1). And Jesus will remind you that just as He commissioned your race, so He will complete it (“author and perfecter” [Heb. 12:2; Phil. 1:6]).

He’s coming to get you. No matter how far you’ve come or how far you have to go, you’re going home with Him (1 Thess. 4:18). The race is a struggle but take courage. We win (1 Cor. 15:57; Heb. 6:19-20).

1. Finishing well is God’s desire for His children. – *“those whom the Lord loves He disciplines”* (Heb. 12:5-6)

You are probably familiar with stories of parents who overly push their children to succeed. It happens in academics, athletics, business, relationships, and talents. The parents have multifaceted reasons.

They want bragging rights or financial endorsements. They may be trying to overcome their own anonymity or failure through their children’s fame and success. Though these parents might try to convince themselves and others differently, their ambition usually has little to do with their children’s welfare.

God wants His children to finish the race well. As we’ve already discussed, the performance of children reflects back on their parents. This is part of God’s motivation for wanting us to be high achievers. He deserves glory. Whatever crowns we gain, we will cast at His feet since we gained them through His strength.

Since we’re talking about God, personal glory as His sole motivation for our success would be legitimate. But God’s driving force goes beyond His person and reaches to us. *We* benefit by finishing well.

Through the race’s process, we mature into God’s image. We learn to depend on and listen to Him (2 Cor. 12:8-9). We gain a sense of confidence and accomplishment. The race also gives us the chance to earn rewards.

He is the One who pushes us, and He will evaluate our performance (Rom. 14:10). He will also promote us when our efforts measure up to His expectations (1 Cor. 3:14). God is not a stingy or reluctant reward giver! When Jesus comes, He will have His reward with Him ready to dispense it at the earliest opportunity (Rev. 22:12). What proud parent wouldn’t want a space infinitely larger than the refrigerator to display their children’s handiwork? Our performance benefits God and us.

How well we do affects others too. Remember. We’re part of a team. No team is stronger than their weakest member. And because we’re a team, we celebrate one another’s accomplishments instead of denigrating them.

What we do is not about us. There’s a larger goal than our pleasure. We give each other permission to confront us and challenge us when we are doing something harmful or stupid. And we give God permission (like He needs it or waits for it) to train us.

Training is indispensable. The more severe or significant the race, the more intense the training must be. There is no more physically strenuous race than the Ironman challenge. “Swim 2.4 miles. Bike 112 miles. Run 26.2. Brag for the rest of your life.” – John Collins, Ironman co-founder.[[3]](#endnote-3) The quote does not mention that there are no breaks in between the different legs of the race.

The Ironman is not something you enter without medical advice. Your spouse might also require you to have a psychiatric exam. Obviously an event like that requires a great deal of preparation. One resource listed several different levels of training. Here’s level 1.

“This plan offers the minimal training you need for a successful Ironman finish. And by successful I mean finishing strong, not limping across the finish line and falling on your face! The plan begins with 4300 yards of swimming, 2 hours and 45 minutes of cycling, and 1 hour and 51 minutes of running *in week 1*. It peaks with 8600 yards of swimming, 8 hours and 50 minutes of cycling, and 2 hours and 45 minutes of running in *Week 22*.”[[4]](#endnote-4) [italics added]

Did you catch that? You start with about five hours of strenuous cardiovascular exercise and almost a mile of swimming. And then *twenty-one weeks later*, you will have worked up to not quite two miles of swimming and thirteen hours of combined running and cycling! That’s quite a commitment simply to be able to say you are tough.

Are you willing to put that much commitment into finishing well a race that has eternal ramifications? God is.

There’s one main reason I don’t push my body hard enough to enter the Ironman. I don’t want to. I don’t like pain. I need a trainer, someone outside of me to get me to do what I would not do on my own. That’s the only way I will get to a place I could never reach without help.

I’m sure that the trainee often feels like the trainer enjoys their work. Maybe a human serving in this capacity does get a little bit of demented pleasure out of people paying them to inflict torture. God does not. So why does He do it? Why does He put His children through so many trying, painful, distressing circumstances? He does it so that when we face the same faith tests that the people of Hebrews 11 did, we will have the same result they had. We will be faithful.

The closer we get to the end, the more painful the race will become, and the likelihood of our giving up will increase. To put someone in a race without preparing them for the race’s rigors is harmful to them (1 Cor. 9:23-27). God doesn’t want us to quit. He wants us to win. God puts us through training not because He enjoys inflicting pain but so that we, like our predecessors, will endure to the end.

**Conclusion:** The finish line is approaching. It can be fun to watch people as they cross it. Their body language usually reveals what kind of an experience they had.

Some cross with their arms raised high, a smile on their face, and an attitude that says, “Let’s do it again!” They are exhilarated. Others are clearly relieved they have reached the race’s conclusion. To them, neither the clock nor their position in the standings is of any consequence. They are satisfied with simply finishing. There were times they weren’t sure they would make it.

Of greater impact on people’s expression than the race is who greets them at the race’s end. A child’s joyful embrace, a husband’s kiss, or a mother’s affirmation can do more to alieve the pain of aching knees than any medication. A painful grimace is quickly erased only to be replaced with a heartfelt grin. A race and its conclusion work together to reshape a face.

I don’t know what your race is doing to your face right now. Does your expression reflect frustration, joy, empathy, or fear? The Bible tells you that what’s waiting for you is worth whatever you must endure. You believe it some days, but the distance that lies in front of you gives strength to your doubts on others. What will the end look like?

The biblical writers understood your questions and your doubts. But they answered both with courage and hope.

*“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.”* (1 Cor. 13:12)

One day, you will reach your race’s conclusion. You will see Jesus’ face. And His face will be reflected in yours. For you see, the finish is the last step the craftsman puts on a work of art after all the roughness has been sanded away. The finish is the smooth, shiny surface that reflects its surroundings.

Why do we race? Why do we struggle? So that we can reflect Jesus to a world that needs to see His face. We do it weakly now, but when we see Him, His image reflected in us will be perfect.

*“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”* (2 Cor. 3:18)

1. “John Stephen Akhwari”; Wikipedia; retrieved Feb, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Lesson 48: Finishing the Race Together (Hebrews 12:15-17)”; Steven J. Cole; 2005; retrieved Feb, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “The Ironman Story”; Ironman; retrieved Feb, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Triathlete Magazine, Essential Week-by-week training guide”; chapter 12; retrieved Feb, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)