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**The Race of Faith****Hebrews 11:29-12:2****Dr. Nathan Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

When I was a sophomore in high school, I joined the cross-country team. Shoulder and wrist injuries meant I was done with baseball and basketball and sent me looking for a new sport. A few of my friends ran, I thought I'd be good at it, I wanted a varsity jacket, and I thought it might help me get abs. So, while I had never run more than two miles at a time, I signed up. It didn't quite unfold like I imagined, but I stuck with it and turned out to be just barely fast enough for varsity. In the process, I found that running transformed my life in wonderful and unexpected ways. Breathing issues I'd dealt with for years all but vanished, except after races when I still wheezed like an accordion. I stopped getting sick. I had more energy. I found a new level of mental and spiritual clarity – to this day, if I really need to hear from God as I'm trying to make a decision, I go for a long run. I also learned the meaning and power of doing something every day. Once I found all that, it didn't matter why I'd started running – I wanted to keep running. That spring, I signed up for track, and running became my sport permanently. I love running – I still run – over the years, many of you have seen me running around town, and the metaphor of running the race of faith is one of my favorite recurring images in scripture. Today, I want to focus on *Hebrews 11* and the beginning of *Hebrews 12*.

*Hebrews 11* is what you might call the hall of fame of faith; it starts with Abel and goes through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David, and Samuel, listing the mighty things that these people, and others, achieved by faith, and the things they suffered and endured for the sake of faith. It concludes with these words:

*“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

As we look at this passage, the first question I want to ask is, “What kind of race are we talking about here?” When it comes to both preparation and execution, training and actually running, knowing the race is hugely important. A cross-country race is roughly three miles on trails through the woods with maybe 30-50 other people. My track event was the 800, a half mile on a hard surface with maybe 6-12 other people. The training, pacing, and the tactics are significantly different. In the race of faith, we need to make sure that our approach matches the race we’re running. I think we learn three things about this race from the passage:

First, this race is “set” or in some translations “marked out” before us. I think of this as a clear application of what Paul says in *Ephesians 2:10* – I know you’ve been hearing from Ephesians – about God having prepared good works in advance so that we might walk in them. Some of what we deal with in life is the result of our own choices; much of it – wars, natural disasters, economic crises, pandemics, political upheaval, and cultural shifts – is not.

When you’re running a race that follows a course, like a cross-country race or a road race does, the most important thing is knowing the course. First, because if you don’t follow it, you’re disqualified, and second, because you need to be prepared for what’s coming. In our league, the Plymouth North cross-country course was notorious – it had a very large and sandy hill with a roughly knee-high chain at the bottom. Every time I ran there, someone ran into it – either because they forgot it was there, or they were just too tired to jump high enough. Knowing the course matters.

So, in the race of faith, how do we know the course? We know the course by looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. The word Christian literally means “little Christ,” and, in one sense, the race before us is to become more and more like Jesus. We also have the whole of scripture and the Holy Spirit to help us see what is marked out for us. Regardless of the time or place in which we find ourselves, the things that God is calling us to do are going to be consistent with what He has revealed to us through scripture.

Second, we are to cast off everything that gets in the way and run with perseverance. If you’re running to win, you need to run hard and get rid of every bit of extra weight. I ran a league championship meet in classic late fall Cape Cod weather: barely 40 degrees, 40 mph wind gusts, and freezing rain to go with it. So, I can tell you

from experience that it doesn't feel great to strip down to short shorts and a thin tank top in those conditions. But it makes you faster, because there's less fabric to absorb the rain and weigh you down – and if it's not making you faster, it's making you slower, and it needs to go. It's simple, but it's not easy or comfortable.

Perseverance means that we have to keep moving forward no matter what. Jesus also models this – His ministry faces setbacks: He is repeatedly misunderstood and rejected by his own people, many of his followers fall away, the disciples are constantly squabbling about who's the greatest, Judas betrays Him, He's arrested, tried unjustly, and finally executed, but none of that stops Jesus from continuing on the course marked for Him, and it is because He keeps going and conquers death that we have access to eternal life.

So, the race of faith follows the course marked out by Jesus, it takes perseverance, and – third thing – it is a relay race. In a relay race, the total distance is divided amongst a team of runners whose goal is to pass a baton around the track as fast as possible. When I ran track, I often ran relays, and at various times I ran the 4 x 400, the 4 x 800, and a distance medley relay which has four legs of different lengths – mile, 1200, 800, and 400. So, this is something that's very familiar and meaningful for me.

How do we know this is a relay? *Hebrews 11* tells us that the heroes of the Bible – the ones we learn about in Sunday School, who have movies and great works of music written about them, who we hear sermons about week after week and year after year – those people, need us to play a role in completing their work. They did great things, but they're not on the track anymore – they fought the fight, they finished the race, they kept the faith, and now, they're done, they're in heaven, and their work is in our hands. That's a relay.

Relays are team events, not individual. Even at the Olympics, all that's recorded is the team's time and the names of the runners – any individual splits are unofficial. On top of that, when you run a relay, the other runners from your team are standing around the track watching you. So, you are surrounded by a crowd of witnesses who've done the thing you're doing now. It is exactly what *Hebrews* is describing.

So, now that we know that the race of faith is a relay race that follows the course marked by Jesus, and takes perseverance, we need to start training accordingly. Most races are won before they start; if one runner is significantly faster than another, there's

no tactic the slower runner can deploy to overcome that – I’ve tried all of them. But, with good training, most people can get significantly faster. It’s usually training, more than talent or even toughness, that makes the biggest impact on performance. When a runner doesn’t perform as well as they expected to, the first thing they’ll look at changing is their training program.

I was fortunate to have a great cross-country and track coach who taught me a lot about training. His name was Matt. Matt had been an All-American runner at Clemson, and a professional runner, before injuries ended his career, which is why he was coaching us instead of training for the London Olympics. At the end of his first season with us, my junior spring, he started telling us that we were going to send a 4 x 800 relay team to the national championship the following season. At first, we weren’t sure what to make of that – I don’t think most of us knew there was such thing as nationals for high school track until he started talking about it.

But Matt was serious. He designed yearlong individual training programs to maximize our performances in the right event at the right time. He often led us through the workouts himself because we trained with precision – not running hard enough was a problem, but so was running too hard. We started doing things none of us had ever heard of anyone doing. We’d run a half mile or even a mile barefoot at the end of practice and then do “sand drills”, which were unusual types of walking and skipping in the long jump pit, we stretched with ropes, and were occasionally told to take ice baths or lay on the ground with our legs up against the wall to drain the lactic acid out of them. Through it all, Matt kept predicting the health and performance of our team, and other teams, with an uncanny degree of accuracy. We bought in, encouraged each other, committed to winning, recruited our friends – many of whom flourished – and held everyone to a high standard.

We restarted a winter track program that had been dormant so long that when we got to the Reggie Lewis Center in Boston for our first meet, no one knew who we were. They barely let us in the door until one ancient-looking official recognized Nauset as the seventh member of the league and intervened. Our fastest guys gave up their best individual events to train for the 800; the 800 was my best event, and I ran on the 4 x 800 relay that still holds the school record for indoor track, but I ended up on the 4 x 400 at the end of the spring season because by then they were all faster than me. No one

made an issue out of any of that. We did, in fact, send our 4 x 800 to nationals, and I would sooner bet on Nauset High School falling into the ocean than that school record getting broken.

I say all of this to illustrate the impact of good training. All of those people listed in *Hebrews 11* are just that, people, like us – the biggest difference is that they have training. The good news is that spiritual disciplines by which we grow our faith are not secrets. They are the same now as they were when Jesus and those heroes of the faith walked the Earth; it's things like reading, studying, and memorizing scripture, spending time in the presence of God through prayer and worship, and fasting – which can also be casting off anything or everything that hinders us, to use the phrase from today's passage.

As we look to Jesus, we see Him consistently practicing these disciplines throughout the Gospels. Jesus knows the scriptures so well that the scribes and Pharisees, who likely had most of the Hebrew scriptures memorized, are eventually scared to question Him about them. Jesus withdraws to quiet places to pray. Jesus fasts after His baptism, and, in *Luke 9*, He has to intervene to cast out a demon that the disciples can't handle because "this kind only comes out by prayer and fasting" – which would suggest an ongoing practice not mentioned explicitly in the text. These disciplines are a way in which we run the race of faith, because they are a way that God transforms us into something more like Christ, and it is becoming more like Christ that makes our witness compelling.

As we do these things, we need to understand that what we are training for and working towards is a relay. You win a relay by training as a group, recruiting more people to join you, and treating the people around you as teammates, not rivals. If you ask Christians you admire to tell you about their spiritual practices, they'll tell you! They might even invite you to join them in some way! You don't get faster by watching other people run, you get faster by running. In the same way, it's important that we find ways we can participate and invite others to join us in the race of faith and the life of the church. Whatever role or roles we fill here, our goal should always be to replace ourselves with people who are "faster" than we are.

And "speed", so to speak, matters because from the moment the women find the tomb empty, the race is on. They go *quickly* to tell the disciples, when the disciples hear

the news, Peter and John run to the tomb, and, in John's gospel, John is sure to mention that he got there first. That sounds like a race to me. The story of the church, from the book of Acts to the present day, is one of a people in motion and on a mission because we are not the only team on the track. Every religion, ideology, and worldview competes to win people to its cause, and every religion, ideology, and worldview gets handed down through generations, or it dies. I'll give you just one example that's stuck with me. A few years ago, my parents took a group from BBC to early Christian sites in Italy and Greece. One of those sites was an ancient house church that's now underneath the city of Rome. The building across the alleyway from that house church was a shrine to Mithras, an Ancient Persian god at the center of a popular Roman mystery cult. Do you know anyone who practices Mithraism? Me neither. And this is part of why we need to understand that the race of faith is a relay race.

When I started running relays, the first thing I learned was DO NOT DROP THE BATON. DO NOT DROP THE BATON. If you drop the baton, you lose, so the handoff is the single most important thing you do. Handoffs can be tricky; one person is exhausted and finishing their race and the other person is antsy and ready to go, but you still have to match speed, or at least get close, and there's a limited zone on the track in which to make the transfer. A successful handoff is both runners' responsibility. If you don't let go of the baton, the race ends with you. If you try to take off without the baton, the race ends with you.

I don't think I'd be doing my job if I preached on this passage and didn't point out that the American church is in danger of dropping the baton. The statistics about declining levels of faith and church attendance, generation over generation, are pretty much common cultural knowledge at this point, and the summary is: it's bad. When Jesus talks about His return at the end of *Luke 17* and beginning of *Luke 18*, He concludes by asking "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on Earth?" And I can understand if that's starting to feel like more of an open question.

I'm truly not interested in assigning blame – a successful handoff is both runners' responsibility – and this a complicated problem that is bigger than any single issue or church. In fact, handing off the baton and reaching the next generation is something that this church has done comparatively well. Just speaking about the time when I was growing up here, there are a half-dozen of us who were part of the youth group together

and ended up as either pastors or worship leaders. That's just a small part of the bigger picture and a small sample of the many ways in which we can faithfully serve God. But, this is a relay race. Running our own race isn't enough; we are also to support our teammates as they run theirs. We cannot succeed alone.

You cannot run a race if you are in denial about the course – that's how you run into a chain – and you cannot win a race by blaming the course for your problems. We need to understand the course that is marked out for us in this time and place, and then respond accordingly. The internet is part of the course, social media is part of the course, shifts in the cultural attitudes and discussion around us are part of the course. While it's good for us to influence the world around us, this passage isn't telling us to fight the course, it's telling us to run the race marked out for us. This is where we need the type of perspective that comes from remembering the cloud of witnesses.

Historically, the church has leveraged world-shaking innovations in information technology – from paper to the printing press to the radio and television – to spread the gospel and draw people closer to God. It has survived foreign conquests, governmental collapses, plagues tens and even hundreds of times as deadly as Covid, and even significant changes in the climate, like the little ice age. It has thrived under empires, monarchies, republics, and democracies, translated itself into new languages, adapted to the shift from a largely illiterate world to a literate one, and changed its style of music and dress more times than we could possibly count. Through all of that, faithful people have passed on the baton – a core set of beliefs encapsulated in things like the Apostles' Creed and practices like baptism and communion – while casting off and changing virtually everything else, lest it get in the way. That is the legacy we get to step into, that is our inheritance as the family of faith, and when we remember what our teammates in the race of faith have overcome through the power and grace of God, it should fill us with confidence and hope. Faith, as *Hebrews 11* tells us, is assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. That is confidence and hope.

But, faith is only valuable if it is placed in the right object. We can have that confidence and hope because, in the relay race of faith, we have the ultimate anchor. In a relay, the anchor is the person who runs the last leg, and, unlike everyone else, the anchor has just one job – go win the race. I find it cool that *Hebrews* refers to Jesus as the anchor of our soul back in chapter 6. In track, I learned very quickly not to judge the

outcome of a relay before the anchors started running because you can lose three out of four legs and win the race, as long as the anchor makes up the gap. Having a great anchor motivates you to keep running hard, even when you're losing, because you know that the race isn't over until it's over.

Jesus is our anchor, Jesus is running the last leg of the relay, and, while He invites all of us to take our turn running our portion, He's going to finish it. His grace and His power are sufficient to cover all of our weaknesses and failings to an extent that kind of breaks the metaphor. Each year in Holy Week, we hear Jesus' last words from the cross, "It is finished," and it is. This race, like most, was won before it started. It looked a lot better for Mithraism than Christianity when the Christians in that ancient Roman house church were collecting the blood of martyrs from the Colosseum, but that was not the last word. Death is not the last word. Jesus gets the last word, and He offers life.

I want to give you one last thing to think about. Jesus walked this Earth 2000 years ago. It takes 3-5 generations to cover 100 years, depending on how young people are when they have kids. It's not a stretch to think that the shortest possible direct chain tracing your faith and the faith of every other Christian on Earth back to the upper room where Jesus and His disciples shared the last supper is smaller than the total number of people in this room right now – but through that process faith has been passed on and passed down person by person, generation by generation, to the point where there are now well over two billion Christians spread across every country on the face of the Earth, all of whom are working to continue that process. Passing on the baton is powerful. And if you've never decided to follow Jesus, know that He is inviting you to take hold of the baton and start running the race of faith. If you do, it will transform your life in wonderful and unexpected ways.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. How are you training for the race of faith?
2. Is there something hindering you that you can cast off?
3. What do you see as the course marked out for you?
4. Who are some of the people who handed off the baton to you?
5. To whom are you working to hand off the baton?