

**“And this Gospel ,”
shall be preached...”**
Matthew 24:14

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

Spiritual Marathon

By Larry J. Walker

A marathon is a special kind of race. It gets its name from the historic endurance run by a Greek soldier in 490 B.C. who, after making four trips to request help, ran from the village of Marathon to Athens, a distance of more than 22 miles, to report a crucial victory in a war against the Persians. After tremendous exertion, he delivered the message and fell down and died.

A marathon is no 50-yard dash. It is a long, grueling, torturing endurance run of usually 26 miles, 385 yards. A runner's primary goal: not to come in first, but to just finish the race. Everyone who finishes is a winner.

I participated in a 20-mile marathon during the 1978 Feast at Fresno, Calif. You learn a lot when you actually go through an experience like that. I want to share with you a number of spiritual lessons and analogies from that run.

The apostle Paul compared the Christian life with running a race in Hebrews 12:1-2 (Revised Standard Version): “Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [referring back to chapter 11's examples of righteous men and women of the past], let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which 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, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and

is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

I don't think the apostle Paul had in mind a 100-yard dash where only one is the winner.

A marathon, like the Christian life, requires a tremendous amount of endurance (as we just read in Hebrews 12), because you're out there for hours (or years) going at it.

The apostle Paul used this analogy because the marathon was something the Corinthians were familiar with. There are many lessons to be learned from Paul's analogy.

Motivation

There is much pain when running a marathon. And unless you concentrate on your goal of finishing the race, you're going to let that pain get to you, and you'll think: What am I doing here? I'm going to give up and quit! And many runners do just that. Often when they have only a few more miles to go, they quit. A marathon runner must be extremely motivated to achieve the goal. And motivation — a desire to take and maintain action — is just as important spiritually.

One of the most important things a runner can do before entering a marathon — especially God's spiritual marathon — is count the cost (Luke 14:26-29). Running a 20-mile race is not something you do on the spur of the moment. Being baptized

and entering the Church is not something that is taken lightly either. There should be careful thought and detailed examination as to why you aspire to enter the race. And once it's started, there should be no turning back.

Training

The one element that often makes or breaks a competitive runner is training. Loss of sleep or lack of exercise can destroy a promising career. The same is true of the spiritual competitor.

“Every competitor in athletic events goes into serious training. Athletes will take tremendous pains for a fading crown of leaves. But our contest is for an eternal crown that will never fade. I run the race then with determination. I am no shadow-boxer. I really fight! I am my body's sternest master, for fear that when I have preached to others I should myself be disqualified” (I Cor. 9:25, Phillips translation). For fear that because of lack of training you won't finish the race, you watch your diet, make sure you get your sleep and above all actually get out and run, jog, pile up the miles to build up your muscles and your endurance (breathing efficiency, capacity of heart and blood vessels, stamina, etc.).

Without enough sleep, proper foods, a regular exercise program and hour upon hour of running to build endurance (or praying to build faith and confidence) you're not going to perform as well. You'll get bogged down, discouraged and in a bad attitude.

There is uncertainty involved in training too. Can you win? Can you finish the course? Will all the hours of effort be wasted in the final minutes of the race? In God's Church, we don't know how much time is left. Often it seems like Christ will never return. A world-class runner would not let negative thoughts disrupt his training or his race. Neither should a Christian, who has a promise from God that if he endures, he will win.

Proper Equipment

A third requirement is proper equipment. All a marathon runner needs are good shoes with arch supports, socks, briefs and shorts. When you're running 20 to 26 miles, you're making 20,000 repeats of the same motion, which can easily cause a blister. Spiritually, we're told, “Let us lay aside

every weight and sin which clings so closely” (Heb. 12:1).

By the same token, you can't wear something real loose either. The biblical expression “gird up your loins” refers to that. When men wore robes they would gather the robe together and cinch it up with a belt, out of the way for running or fighting. Ephesians 6:13-14: “Take [put on] the whole [spiritual] armor of God . . . having girded your loins with truth.”

Competition

I went to services in the morning, and they announced the marathon for that afternoon. I barely had time to get home and back. I'd eaten a fairly light breakfast, and I grabbed a handful of dried Granola, drank some apple juice and took off.

We got to the track, and guess how many were there to run the marathon? Fifteen! Out of about 6,000 at the Fresno Feast. That's significant too, because the same thing is true in a spiritual marathon, isn't it? God says, many are called and few are chosen. One of the organizers of the marathon led the first lap to show us the way. Jesus Christ is our pacesetter. In running this spiritual race with endurance, we look to Him.

We all ran the first lap at the same pace, at about 8½ minutes per mile. Into the second lap, I came to a sobering realization. I started getting tired and experiencing some pain. In spite of counting the cost in advance, I thought, I'm not going to be able to finish. Spiritually, that often happens to Christians after being baptized.

I had two choices — either keep up the pace until I just couldn't make it any longer and then drop out, or slow down and make sure to finish. My goal was not to try to beat anybody, but to finish the race. So I slowed down. Had I tried to compete with the guys up front, it would have prevented me from learning my own capabilities and limitations. And He says to us in I Corinthians 10:12 to compare yourself with others is unwise. Sometimes you have to slow down in order to make it through a trial.

At times a muscle just above my right knee would begin to cramp, and I would have to walk for a while, which is a very humbling thing to do. But it takes humility in God's way of life, too, to maintain your own pace even though you see others advanc-

ing beyond you and some passing you up. But if someone else is ordained as a deacon or elder and you're not, that has nothing to do with your race. You're not in competition with other people.

Periodic Nourishment

Also extremely important in a distance race is periodic nourishment. It's like a Christian being fed spiritual nourishment. When running in 80-plus degree temperatures, which is a dry heat, your body loses fluids. Though I drank a quart of orange juice and eight cups of water during that race, I lost eight pounds.

There were hydrants along the course, supposedly with water, but they turned out to be dry. Those can be compared to false churches in the Bible (Jer. 2:13).

One of the women there kept my orange juice for me part of the race. But she kept saying, "I don't know if I can stay for the whole race." It's a comforting thing where Christ says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). Whenever we need that periodic nourishment, Christ is there any time of the day or night. II Corinthians 4:16 says the inward man must be renewed day by day.

Finishing the Course

The marathon is a private race. You don't have spectators sitting in the stands cheering you on. After a while a runner gets extremely tired. So do Christians. It's not that they want to quit, but they long for Christ to return.

Keep in mind Galatians 6:9, "Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall

reap, if we do not lose heart." Just keep on going, one step after the other, keep moving toward the finish at a realistic pace.

I got down to the final lap and hadn't seen anybody for a long time. As I stopped for my last cup of water, I asked, "Is anybody else still out?" And they said, "You've got fourth place locked up if you finish." What? Fourth place! Out of 15 runners?

One said: "So many people have come by here and got their cup of water, and that's the last we see of them. They just kind of quietly drop out." Tragically, that happens in God's Church. People don't say anything to anybody sometimes. Those people have taken their eyes off Christ.

The fifth-place winner was a girl. She had gotten tired and thought she had to drop out, but with a sudden burst of energy she finished in the dark with a flashlight. That shows real motivation and endurance.

A cookout was held after the race, but I just wanted to get home, take a shower and drink a few quarts of orange juice. There's going to be a meal after the spiritual marathon too. But I guarantee you I'm not going to miss the great marriage banquet of Christ.

At services the next day, the names of the finishers were announced. It was a nice feeling. But how does that compare to having Jesus Christ look you in the eye and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" and having your own name announced at that wedding banquet? The rewards you receive are for all of eternity, not just for a fleeting moment here on earth. □