

## Run to Win

✠ **Perseverance** (vv.1-3)

✠ **Discipline** (vv.4-11)

✠ **Strength** (vv.12-13)

In the name of Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, dear fellow heirs of grace and glory:

Last Sunday my wife Cindy and I were privileged to attend the installation of one of our nephews at the Opening Service of Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wisconsin. LPS is one of two high schools supported by our Congregational Mission Offerings in the Wisconsin Synod for training future pastors and teachers to proclaim God's Word in its truth and purity. Jon Gross is one of several "tutors," house parents for our high school students, a high honor in our schools.

Last year Jon taught in the Dominican Republic. I had heard by the family grapevine that since worship was in Spanish, he and another teacher listened to New Life website sermons. Jon told me that they read the liturgy in English and even gathered others to worship with them. Though the two young men have returned to the States, their listening group continues. So your offerings are supporting other souls for Christ in the Caribbean and around the world. God is doing more than we can ask or imagine to encourage our race through life. Following Jesus from grace to glory, let's **Run to Win**, first by....

### ✠ **Perseverance** (vv.1-3)

Stories and illustrations in sermons may keep your eyes from drooping, but the real test is whether they help you remember the lesson of the text. Jon actually remembered his favorite illustration from this time last year. It reminds me of this text. Remember? When you finally come home to heaven, you can picture it like entering a huge stadium with millions of spectators cheering. Weary from your last days on earth, worn down with cares, you look up at their smiling faces and realize they're all cheering for you! There in the middle of the stadium is the One who made it all possible. You've never seen Him before, but you know Him and love Him because of the scars on the hands holds out to welcome you to glory. Jesus paid the price with His blood. He wants you to be forever with Him and the Father and the Holy Spirit in the lasting joys of heaven. Remembering that joyful welcome gives you **Perseverance**.

*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..."* We've seen some of their names in the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, heroes of faith like Abel and Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, plus so many others for whom nothing was more important than getting home to heaven with God. Two weeks ago someone actually said our sermon from Hebrews 11 should have been longer. *"Such a great cloud of witnesses"* help us to **Run to Win!** *"Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."*

See our problem? If we take our eyes off Jesus and focus on our troubles and heartaches, we sink in the waves like Peter on the Sea of Galilee. You've been crying out to God for help, and here is Jesus today reaching out His hand to lift you up. Some of you ran cross country. You didn't get to choose your own way, did you? Up the hills and through the valleys that *"great cloud of witnesses"* keeps cheering you on the path the Lord marked out for your life. It's not as if people in heaven worry about us here.

But in one of the Psalms they're quoted as saying, ***"We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the LORD grant all your requests."*** (Psalm 20:5 NIV) Picture all those heroes of faith cheering you to keep your eyes on Jesus. He suffered the shame of our sin. He rules all things from God's ***"right hand"*** to bring us home to that sinless land of light.

Don't get weighed down with ***"sin that so easily entangles"*** – not your sin, or the sin of others dumping on you. Remember that story of the old mule that fell into the well? I don't know if this is possible, but it makes a good story. Falling hurt, but nothing like when his master looked down then walked away. When dirt started falling on his head, the mule knew he was in trouble. You see, his master decided neither the well nor the old mule were worth saving. He called his neighbors to help him bury both. Terrified at first, the old mule finally started talking to himself: "Shake it off and step up....Shake it off and step up....Shake it off and step up...." At last, the bruised and dirty old mule stepped triumphantly out of the well, trouble turned to blessing. And so God helps us **Run to Win** with **Perseverance**. You can "shake it off and step up" when you keep your eyes on Jesus.

### ✠ Discipline (vv.4-11)

Don't get weighed down with your own sins. Think of a woman walking out to her clothes line back in the 1950's. The muddy gumbo was so gooey she had to leave her shoes behind and go back to the house barefoot. What do you and I need to leave behind on this path that God has marked out for us? If we try to choose our own way, we end up like Christians in jail today, hopefully repentant, yet reaping what they sowed by their sin. Some were respected pastors whom I've known and loved as brothers, strong in one area, yet weak in secret sins they thought would never see the light of day. Now their ministry and freedom are locked up. They serve as warnings to us all not to think too highly of ourselves. As one wise Christian always said, "But for God's grace, there go I."

Warnings are a blessing that help us **Run to Win**: ***"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."***

One of our tutors in high school was coaching a team of freshmen who didn't make the cut. I was the Sophomore student coach with classmates determined to beat those freshman. What a disgrace if we lost! Unfortunately, the freshman tutor-coach was also the referee. And the more my classmates complained about his calls, the worse they got. Tutor seemed to think there were other lessons to teach that day with a basketball game. Game over, but my classmates kept complaining. A commotion turned me around to the back of the stage. There was Tutor with both hands straight up like this. At the end of each hand dangled a Sophomore with his feet off the floor. Tutor went back and forth in one face then the other: "The game is over. So is your mouthing off!" They just nodded wide eyed. Nowadays parents would sue the school. But their parents would say, "You better learn your lesson or next time will be worse." To this day, those two men still praise that Tutor as one of the best we ever had.

There is a ***"harvest of righteousness and peace"*** that comes from firm, consistent, loving discipline. Even in lesser ways I saw it as a junior counselor at Lutheran Bible Camp. The kid I had to chew out in the morning would follow me around all day trying to make up. I made it easy.

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*“Righteousness and peace”* are so pleasant. My first cabin of 4<sup>th</sup> Grade boys begged me to play my harmonica, then complained when I put it away because of their noise. But the second night I couldn’t play three songs before they were all fast asleep. *“He gives sleep to those he loves.”* (Psalm 127:2)

*“Righteousness and peace”* rest easy by repentant faith in Jesus’ forgiveness. *“How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!”* He helps us **Run to Win** by giving us ...

### † **Strength (vv.12-13)**

*“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”* The earlier verses speak against sinful pride and arrogance, thinking we are standing when we ought to take heed lest we fall. But these last two verses seem aimed at false humility, fear that you’re not good enough for anything with God. By nature, that’s true. But God loved you anyway and *“while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8) Now that the Holy Spirit has come to live in our hearts, God wants us to trust His grace to make us strong and competent. He will not leave us in our sinful weakness.

Unfortunately, none of us are immune from both types of pride, arrogant or false humility. You bounce back and forth like a ping pong ball, too proud at one point, then crashing on conceit good for nothing. Christ is the cure to both sins. Christ our Savior strengthens us with His forgiveness that powers our arms to serve, our knees to stand, and our feet to lift up others. God says, *“Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”*

Several years ago a young cousin of mine was dying of cancer. She had renounced her Christian faith years ago. As her loving parents desperately tried to minister to her, she would not pray or listen to the Bible. Believers all over the world were asking the Lord to have mercy on her and heal her soul. Calling on her was one of my most difficult visits. When I offered to read a psalm, she said, “You can for yourself if you want. I don’t need it.” Later I found out she had trouble with two groups of people: pastors and relatives. A month before she died, news came that she was repentant, quietly listening to God’s Word and praying for grace. When I attended her funeral, the pastor preached a beautiful law and gospel sermon about our God of reconciliation. Afterwards he told me, “You would not believe who finally reached her. It was the most unlikely missionary in our congregation. But God worked in her to ask the right question at the right time, and your cousin repented. Now she’s in glory with God.”

Don’t ever sell yourself short, dear Christian, because then you’re really selling God short. He strengthens by His Word and sacrament, just as He disciplines us to persevere. Let us **Run to Win**. And even if only one person in our lifetime comes to faith by God’s Word through us, it will be worth it in glory when you look up to see that soul in the crowded stadium cheering you home to victory in Christ. Yes, in Christ alone! Amen.