

**OBC: One-off Service (Hebrews 12:1-2)**

**Matt Gordon - Sunday 11 November 2018**

*The Race of Faith*

The Christian life is a race of endurance, perseverance, strength and overcoming

Sometimes I get up to talk here on a Sunday morning and I can't wait to share what I have with you. I've done all my preparation, I feel up to the challenge and competent to talk about the topic.

Other times I get up to talk and I feel completely out of my depth on the topic and that someone else should be up here to share their knowledge and experience. And it's because at this church there are people who have been Christians, following Jesus and living the life of a disciple for many, many years. You have been through incredibly difficult times, weathered many storms, and had your faith tested – and you're still walking the journey and still passionate about Jesus.

I am inspired by you. Your lives are a testimony to God's love, grace, forgiveness, power and purpose. And I hope that one day I will be one of you too. One who has been through the journey, the trials, testing and temptations, and is still standing, still loving Jesus more each day.

This morning I am placing myself in that second camp. I've got a message on my heart to share, but I don't consider myself an expert in any way. Rather, I'm an amateur on the journey alongside you, or more likely behind you.

The inspiration behind this message came from a television show. A unique, serious, heart-felt programme that showcases endurance, strength, wisdom, and passion.

I am of course referring to Australian Ninja Warrior.

**(SLIDE)**

If you haven't heard about this show, let me quickly bring you up to speed, because it really is as good as the title and picture suggests.

I think it began in America and it's a **race** where men and women of all ages compete in a Ninja-style obstacle course, testing their agility, intellect, strength and speed.

There are heats, then semi-finals, and finally the Grand Final, where only the best, strongest and quickest ninjas race against each other to get up to the top of an obstacle called Mount Midoriama.

Here's a clip of one of the competitors in action.

**(Video Clip: Dylan Pawson)**

That guy made it look like a piece of cake. The majority of the wannabe ninja warriors don't actually finish the course. It's designed to be tough. Only the strongest and fastest are meant to make it to the end. It's a race after all.

So I've been watching the latest Australian series with Roxy and my two oldest boys Noah and Elijah. And it's brought on lots of challenges at home – such as who can do the most press ups and sit ups! (I can almost beat Noah, my nine year old, now).

One cool thing about the show is that as well as seeing athletes compete in the physical race, you also get to hear some of their story that led them to this day and the emotional and mental race they have been through. Some have had health complications to overcome. Some have been in horrific accidents, almost died and are now trying to live life to the full. Some have wanted to inspire others through competing in the race. And some are in their fifties or over and want to show they can still race.

So it's all ages and stages and you get to see the heart and purpose behind each individual's journey and race.

This got me thinking about how the life of faith, the decision to follow Jesus, is also like running a race. The race of faith.

### **(SLIDE)**

It's a race of endurance, perseverance, strength and overcoming. And sadly, it's not a race that all who begin will and do finish. Sometimes the race becomes too much and people decide for different reasons to pull out of it.

So this morning I want to talk about 'running the race of faith', some of the obstacles we face, and what we can do to give ourselves the best shot of finishing the race and enduring till the end.

Some of you here today may feel like you're really only near the beginning of your race.

For you, I hope this message will encourage you as you may be facing difficulties in your life or you may be struggling with something that you can't seem to overcome.

Some of you may feel like you're near the middle of your race, but you're tiring a bit. Life has knocked you around. For you, I hope this message will refresh you and help you to get back on track.

And some of you here today are the people I spoke about earlier. You've been running the race for a long time and you're doing so well. You inspire me and I hope this message further propels you and motivates you to see that your race is inspiring to others and that it's not over yet. There's always more to see and more of God to discover.

We're going to focus on the book of Hebrews chapter 12 where Paul introduces this idea of the race, but before we do, let's pray and ask God to speak to each of us about our own race.

### **(Prayer)**

Just to set the scene for Paul's words we're about to read: At the start of Hebrews he talks about Jesus as the Supreme Revelation of God. If you've seen Jesus you've seen God.

Jesus was faithful throughout His life and modelled this life of faith to those around Him and those who would come after Him.

Paul then talks about Jesus as our Compassionate High Priest who understands what we go through and then he encourages his listeners to progress in this life of faith. He then talks about the new priestly service and the new covenant we have in Christ and then the meaning and greatness behind Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.

Paul then talks about our family heritage – our great, great, great, great grand-fathers and grand-mothers like Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, Samuel and David – to name a few – who lived their faith out, struggled but ultimately overcame the obstacles around them to finish their race.

And it's straight after this list of impressive people who accomplished incredible achievements in their race that Paul speaks of the 'race of faith' that **all** Christians then and now find themselves in.

So let's read chapter 12, verses one and two:

**(SLIDE)**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now He is seated in the place of honour beside God's throne. (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Paul is quick to point out that:

**(SLIDE)**

**In our race of faith we have cheerleaders.**

These people, these family members, some of whom I mentioned before, surround us and motivate us to keep going. They've been where we are at, they know the conditions of the race, and they've overcome the obstacles around them.

I don't have time this morning to go through what each went through and overcame, but let me encourage you to just take a fresh read through Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and you will see how much stuff they had to deal with in their lives, how they weren't perfect, but ultimately how they strived to follow God and put faith into action in their lives. They ran their race well. And they are cheering each one of us on.

Paul is also quick to point out that:

**(SLIDE)**

**In our race of faith we need to strip off all sin.**

Paul knows that there are things that weigh us down in the race. Things that automatically slow us down. The big one is *sin*, which “so easily trips us up.” ‘Sin’ is not a word talked about much in our culture today and it’s almost seen as politically incorrect to talk about it. But today I’m going to.

Imagine a runner who has heavy weights attached to both of her legs. She is trying to run at a good pace but just can’t get up the momentum or speed to do so. She is ‘weighed down’ and the race is incredibly difficult. Eventually she over-exerts herself and trips up because of the weights around her.

This is what living with sin is like. Sin weighs us down.

**(SLIDE)**

Now I know that all of us – whether we are Christians or not - struggle with sin and we will never fully overcome it in this life. I know that is true. But I also know that as Christians, not getting a handle on sin in our lives and not doing our utmost to get rid of it, to strip it off, is detrimental and damaging to our relationship with God and our relationships with each other.

Every sin costs.

**(SLIDE)**

It cost Jesus His life. It costs you your peace. It costs your relationships pain and suffering. Sin has consequences – sometimes we see them and experience them immediately; sometimes we see them and experience them a bit later on; and sometimes we might not see or experience them, but know for sure that God does and often people close to us do too.

**(SLIDE)**

Sin trips us up. In other translations the Bible says it ‘ensnares’ us. Or, it ‘traps’ us. The bait is set by our enemy.

Our enemy, the devil, doesn’t want you or me to finish our race. He wants to trip us up and take us out. And he will do all in his power to accomplish this.

He knows your weaknesses, your Achilles heel. The thing or sin in your life where you are most vulnerable and exposed.

If before you became a Christian you struggled with gossip and talking about people behind their backs, the devil will convince you that this is harmless, it doesn’t really hurt anyone, and no-one will even know anyway.

If you struggle with pornography, the devil will tempt you when you are alone and on sites you shouldn’t be and try to convince you that it’s your little secret, you deserve to see it, and it’s just a little harmless fun.

If you have problems with anger, the devil will tempt you to lose your cool and abuse someone verbally, physically, or emotionally, when certain circumstances arise.

The devil has a mission – to steal, to kill, and ultimately to destroy you.

Sin is part of his plan.

One thing I've learned in my race is not to be too quick to think I have fully overcome certain sin or sins. Because once you believe you have, temptation can rear its ugly head again and cause havoc in your life and your relationships with people and with God. There is nothing good or holy about sin. It separates us from God.

But one thing we can remember is that ultimately God has dealt with the problem of sin through His Son, Jesus.

**(SLIDE)**

The Bible says that Jesus **became** sin for us. And God dealt with it once and for all on the Cross. And that cost Him everything.

If it cost God everything to deal with the problem of sin by sacrificing his Son on the Cross, don't think for a minute that you can get rid of sin so easy and straight away in your life. That just won't work. But also, don't think that you can excuse certain sin in your life and not deal with it.

Sin is destructive. It seeks to destroy, devour and ultimately bring death. If we knew what it did to God and does to us, I think we would be better motivated to stop indulging in it and see that every sin – whether big or little in our eyes – is the same in God's eyes and has only one outcome. So Paul says, *"let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up."*

Paul next points out that:

**(SLIDE)**

**In our race of faith we can run with endurance.**

*"Let us run with endurance the race God has set before us."*

Endurance is the key to any big race - a half marathon, marathon, ultra-marathon or beyond. Endurance is part of the plan. Endurance takes into account that there will be obstacles and barriers to overcome. There may be injuries along the way, the feeling of dehydration, the mental wall to push through, and pain pumping through your veins.

Endurance is going through the pain, wall, dehydration and injuries. The storms.

In the Christian life, endurance means going through the storms of life.

**(SLIDE)**

There was a pastor on-board an airplane on a long flight. The first warning of approaching problems came when the 'Fasten your seat belts' sign flashed on. Then, after a while, a calm voice said, "We will not be serving beverages at this time as we're expecting a little turbulence. Please be sure your seat belt is fastened."

As the pastor looked around the aircraft, it became obvious that many of the passengers were becoming apprehensive. Later, the voice of the announcer said, "We are so sorry that we are unable to serve the meal at this time. The turbulence is still ahead of us."

Then the storm broke. The ominous cracks of thunder could be heard even above the roar of the engines. Lightning lit up the darkening skies, and within moments the huge plane was like a cork tossed around on a celestial ocean. One moment the airplane was lifted on terrific currents of air; the next, it dropped as if it were about to crash.

The pastor confessed that he shared the same discomfort and fear of those around him. As he looked around the plane, he saw that nearly all the passengers were upset and alarmed. Some were praying. The future seemed bleak, people were wondering if they were going to make it through the storm.

**(How many of us have that mind-set when we are going through a storm in life?)**

The pastor then spotted a little girl. And surprisingly, she was calm. Apparently the storm meant nothing to her. She had tucked her feet beneath her as she sat on her seat; she was reading a book and everything within her small world was calm and orderly.

Sometimes she closed her eyes, then she'd read again; then she'd straighten her legs, but worry and fear didn't seem to be in her world. When the plane was being knocked by the terrible storm, when it lurched this way and that way, as it rose and fell with frightening severity, when all the adults were scared half to death, he saw that this young, marvellous child was completely composed and unafraid.

The pastor could hardly believe his eyes.

The plane finally reached its destination after going through the storm and as all the passengers hurried to get off, the pastor lingered to speak to this young girl. He asked her how she managed to stay so calm with the storm and everything that was going on around her.

The child replied, "Cause my Daddy's the pilot, and he's taking me home."

**(SLIDE)**

That little girl knew there was a storm out there and the going was rough, but she knew who ultimately was in control of the plan. She trusted her dad and knew he was taking her home. She endured through the storm. Her eyes, her focus, was on her dad.

Paul points out that:

**(SLIDE)**

**In our race of faith we endure by keeping our eyes on Jesus.**

*"Let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus."*

It sounds so easy in theory doesn't it? And people often start the journey and feel so close to God. We're discovering more and more about Him. He's answering all of our prayers; blessing us in so many ways; pouring His love out on us.

Life is great and the race is easy.

But then we start to experience things we don't like:

**(SLIDE)**

Unanswered Prayers; unforeseen circumstances; uninvited trials; unwanted difficulties.

Life is messy and the race is hard.

We think things will get better but they don't. Financial pressure comes on. Our health deteriorates. Our relationships sour. Our friends stop being friends with us. People make fun of us because we believe in a God we can't see. And if we're honest, God seems distant.

If this is you today, I want to speak directly into that pain, numbness and distance you feel. Because even though I am only really in the beginning stage of my journey, I can relate to all of those things and I don't have a perfect life or perfect relationship with God.

I struggle. I battle. I get mad. I sin. I have bad thoughts. I feel distant from God. And to be honest, as a family we have had a really hard year – so I 'get' it.

However - I also pray. I plead. I get before God. I ask for forgiveness. I read the Bible to know God more. I confide in others I trust. I look for God in the chaos, in the crazy, even in the distance I feel.

**(SLIDE)**

I try and fix my eyes on Jesus. And no, it's not a magic formula to have a great relationship with God. It's not a tick the box when it comes to Christianity. It's a relationship. It takes work. It takes time.

Someone once asked me, why doesn't God just take me to heaven when I become a Christian, instead of leaving me in this world to go through various trials and difficulties? Wouldn't it be a lot easier?

Well of course it would. But who said God is about anything being easy? I think the number one reason is so that we can take others with us to heaven. If we were just taken to heaven straight away, who would tell those left behind?

But I also think another crucial reason is that God actually wants us to develop endurance and perseverance, and overcome obstacles in life. He wants our character to mature and strengthen. He wants us to overcome. He want us to become like His Son, Jesus. And we do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus through all of life's storms that come our way.

Paul points out that in our race of faith:

**(SLIDE)**

**Jesus is the champion.**

*“The champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.*

Jesus endured. Jesus overcame. Jesus is now in the place of honour.

Jesus’ race meant He had to die; He had to give His life. And He did so willingly. As we just read, Jesus *endured* the Cross, disregarding its shame.

### **Communion Time**

**(SLIDE)**

The Cross was a symbol of shame. It signified weakness, vulnerability and death. People who died on a Cross were scorned by society. They were lifted up so that people could bring them down with their words and their actions. But even before they were put on the Cross, they were beaten and abused and stripped naked by soldiers.

Jesus went through all that. The physical pain, the emotional shame, death on a Cross. He endured.

The Cross is our symbol of hope. It shows the lengths that Jesus went through to make things right between us and God and demonstrate the great love God has for us.

As we take Communion together, let’s remember Jesus and what He has done for us. The invitation is to all of those who follow Jesus. If you call Jesus ‘Lord’ in your life and you’ve made the decision to follow Him with your life, then it doesn’t matter where you are in the race, the invitation is to come.

The bread symbolises Jesus’ body, which was broken.

The juice symbolises Jesus’ blood, which was shed.

Let’s eat and drink together as we remember Jesus and His race.

### **After communion**

Paul writes that *“Now he (Jesus) is seated in the place of honour beside God’s throne.”*

That is the end result of Jesus’ race. He was honoured. And now in our race of faith:

**(SLIDE)**

We have cheerleaders; we need to strip off all sin; we can run with endurance; we endure by keeping our eyes on Jesus; because ultimately He is the champion.

I know it’s easy to get up here and preach this way of life; it’s hard and another thing completely to live it. Sometimes we get things right; and sometimes we get things wrong. Sometimes we encourage each other; and sometimes we hurt each other. Sometimes we listen to God; and sometimes we resist Him.



Just as someone said “It takes real faith to be an atheist”, well it takes real strength and perseverance to follow Christ.

That’s why I’m so inspired by you people who have been following Him for many years, through various trials and storms in life, getting closer to Him and becoming more like Him. I look up to you and learn from your example and character.

And as I come to a close this morning and the worship team come to lead us in a final song, you’ve answered the all-important ‘why’ question for me. Why run this race? Why endure?

Because it’s worth it. Because life is a gift. Because through running the race you are being transformed into the likeness and character of Christ.

And ultimately, it’s because of Christ.

Because of who He is and what He has done. He is our Supreme Example. He is our Suffering Servant. He is our Persevering Saviour. He ran his race and said at the end, “It is finished.” My prayer is that through focusing on Him and keeping the main thing the main thing we too will find the strength, perseverance and endurance to overcome obstacles and to weather storms in our life and run our race until it is finished.

Don’t give up. Keep going. Run your race. Jesus is with you. Championing you on. God is great!