Running the Race – 2/12/2017

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Hebrews 12:1-3

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, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our 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. 3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

1. Super Bowl 2017

Last Monday I met with a few Korean pastors in Quincy to plan our mission trip to Guatemala. We began by talking about Super Bowl 51. One of the pastors shared that he was so sad when he thought the Patriots were going to lose. So, at the end of the third quarter, he went to bed to sleep. Later, when he learned that the Patriots won, he couldn't believe it. If I were still in Andover, I probably would have done the same. It seemed impossible for the Patriots to win. But they did. One of the newspapers described the Patriots' victory this way: "the Patriots needed many miracles to pull off the Super Bowl comeback" (torontosun.com). And we know that many miracles happened.

I'm glad the Patriots won the Super Bowl. But I am so glad that the Super Bowl game showed us that even today miracles can happen. In addition, the Super Bowl taught us our Christian life is like the Super Bowl. Let me compare the Super Bowl game and Christian life. Just as the players in the game run, we are all running the race. Just as the players of the game focus on the quarterback, Christians also focus on the Lord Jesus. And just as the players run toward the end zone, we also run toward the goal that the Lord has shown us. Many passages in the Bible confirm that we are runners of the race of faith. Paul says in Acts 20:24, "**I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace**." What would be the secret of successful running?

2. Running the Race

Today's scripture is the answer to the question. Hebrews 12:1 says, "**let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us**." The writer of

Hebrews says that Christians need perseverance when we run the race. The term “perseverance” means “a patient enduring.” If I were to put this into other terms, I would say the meaning of perseverance is “never give up.” As you may already know, at the end of the third quarter, the score of the Super Bowl was 28 to 9. Many people didn’t believe the Patriots would be able to score that many points in one quarter. However, in the fourth quarter with 2:28 minutes remaining, the score was 28 to 20. Then with only 57 seconds remaining, the score was 28 to 28. In overtime, with 11:02 minutes remaining, the score was 34 to 28, and the Patriots won. The perseverance of the Patriots gave the team a miraculous victory.

Is there any difference between the running in the Super Bowl and Christians running? Yes, there is. The Super Bowl players run for 30 minutes for the first half, and after a 30-minute break, they play another 30 minutes. The Christian running isn’t as fast as football, but we run continually. The Christian life is like a marathon rather than a sprint. The purpose of running for both Super Bowl players and Christians is the same, which is victory. However, the big difference between a football game and our Christian life is that in football, one team wins and another team loses. In the Christian life, everyone wins and victory is guaranteed. In 2 Timothy 4:8 Paul says, **“From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”** Since Paul had confidence of his final victory, he was able to keep running the race disregarding all kinds of hardship.

3. Run with Perseverance

Paul’s life was full of persecution and affliction. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 he shares with us his many different kinds of sufferings, “**Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. [25]Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; [26]on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; [27]in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked**.” In these dangerous and painful circumstances Paul never gave up on running.

We may not experience persecution or affliction as the apostle Paul experienced. However, verse one of our scripture suggests that everyone needs to lay aside "**every weight and the sin that clings so closely**." What are "every weight" and "the sin"? These are the outside and inside challenges in our Christian life. When we try to follow God's direction there is something that hinders our intimate relationship with the Lord. How can we overcome all kinds of challenges and hindrances in our race?

4. Focusing on Jesus

In verse 2, the author of Hebrews tells us we need to focus on Jesus when we run the race because Jesus showed us the example of perseverance in his life. Jesus endured pain, shame, frustration, and disappointment, despair, loneliness, abandonment, and betrayal. But at the same time Jesus had the joy of forgiving those who killed him, being resurrected from the dead, and being seated at the right hand of the throne of God. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured hostility against him so that we may not "**grow weary or lose heart**" (12:3). In other words, Jesus overcame all hardships so that we would never give up in any circumstances.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that there are so many winners who ran before us and won the race in the Old Testament. They are called "**a cloud of witnesses,**" and are mentioned in chapter 11. They are the role models who show the power of faith. At the same time, these witnesses confirm God's faithfulness. Among the heroes of faith in the chapter 11 Abraham and Moses are mentioned in detail. Abraham and Moses are good examples of perseverance. Abraham waited for 25 years until God's promise had been fulfilled through his son Isaac. Moses was patient for 40 years until the Israelites reached the promised land. And God was with them always.

5. Jesus Runs with Us

What is the role of the coach? In the Super Bowl, the coach only tells the players how to play. But when Christians run, sometimes our coach runs with us. God was always with the Israelites in the Old Testament. In Exodus 33:14, God says to Moses, "**My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest**." God promises Moses that God would be with them always in their journey to the promised land. In Matthew 28:20, right before his ascension Jesus promises that he will be with his disciples and with us to the ends of the earth. And when we read Luke 24:13-15, we notice

Jesus was walking with his disciples after his resurrection. **"Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles* from Jerusalem, 14and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them."** When Jesus' disciples were so disappointed by his death, they went to Emmaus. And the resurrected Jesus knew how they felt and walked with them, making their hearts burn.

Have you ever experienced the power of someone's presence? Some of you may already know about the story that happened in 1992 at the Barcelona Olympics. British sprinter Derek Redmond was running in the semifinal of the 400m. He was looking strong when suddenly he tore his hamstring. Instead of crumbling to the ground, he continued hobbling toward the finish line. Suddenly his father, Jim, ran from the stands and brushed off security to join his son. With tears in both of their eyes, the Redmonds finished the race together. That's what our coach Jesus does when we are in trouble.

6. Conclusion

The Letter to the Hebrews was written when imprisonment of Christian leaders took place and persecution was becoming a serious concern. Many Christians began to lose hope and left the Christian faith. As we were losing hope in the Super Bowl game, we could lose our hope because of our circumstances. However, last Sunday, we experienced the resurrection of the Patriots. As long as we run the race with perseverance looking to Jesus, we will experience miracles. Jeremiah 29:11 says, **"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."** God has the plans for us, plans for our restoration and resurrection.

7. Application

We do not know when our race will end. But until that time, we keep on running, looking to Jesus who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He will keep encouraging us not to give up. Even when the end comes, we know that resurrection is waiting for us. We give thanks to the Lord who gives us hope always. Listen to what God says to Isaiah, "**do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand**" (41:10). Amen.