

Date: 4th November 2018
Talk: Peregian
Passage: Hebrews 12:1-3

So today is the start of a 4-week series called: "That's from the Bible"

There are many biblical phrases in common use in our language,

Phrases often used by people who have no idea they are quoting the Bible

I'm sure that you've even used some of these yourself without realising.

Well, over the next four weeks we're going to look at four of these oft-used quotes

"Run the race set before us"

"Greater love has no one than this"

"like a lamb to the slaughter"

"Eat, drink and be merry"

Did you know all those came from the bible?

Well, stay tuned for the next 4 weeks to find out more.

This week we're looking at the phrase "run the race set before us"

A very appropriate phrase considering it's the Noosa Tri this weekend

Now I bet you didn't know, but I'm a highly experienced long distance runner

Yes, you all say

We can see that

Ruth clearly has that sinewy, 0% fat body of a marathon runner

Ha – I lie

I'm no marathon runner

But for the last two years I have taken part in the Sunshine Coast Marathon

So my experience is one race per year!

and although I can claim to have been in a marathon event

I fall over just at the thought of running that distance.

I actually took part in the 10km race,

jogging some of it

but walking a lot of it as well.

So I'm not really someone who can speak with any authority on distance running

But I'm sure that even if you're not a runner,

You can relate to some of the following feelings:

Bubbling with nervous anticipation as you line up

The initial high when the klaxon goes and the race starts

Feeling really excited and fired up and full of energy as you get going

Maybe going off quite fast because you feel so good

Then dropping back into a more steady pace,

something a bit more sustainable.

Then, as the pain and tiredness kicks in

beginning to wonder why on earth you are putting yourself through this

Then hitting that barrier where all you want to do is stop,

because it's just too hard.

But then pushing on, pushing through that barrier

Finding encouragement from those running with you

Drawing on reserves you didn't even know you had

And the last km of the race you run on a high
Because the end is in sight
And you've kept going, you haven't given in
The prize of crossing that finish line is so worthwhile
(even if the plastic medal isn't!)

Now, does any of that sound familiar to any of you?
And I don't mean in long-distance running
But in our lives, as we endeavour to walk closely with Christ
Well I'm sure that even the recipients of this letter we're looking at today
Could relate to these feelings.

Let me give you a bit of background on the letter to the Hebrews

In fact not much is known about this letter

It's not known who wrote it or even who specifically it was written to

But it was written round about AD 60-70

to a church made up of Jewish converts,

Christian Jews who were being tempted back to their Jewish faith.

They were starting to drift, losing focus, losing energy.

Settling back into their old ways.

How do we know this?

Well, earlier in the letter,

the writer talks about the need for them to pay attention lest they drift away

He says that they no longer try to understand

He's concerned that they're neglecting the great salvation available to them

That's the condition of this Hebrew church

it sounds as if they've hit the pain barrier, doesn't it

So the whole letter is written to convince them to keep going

To remain faithful to Jesus as their only source of salvation.

And in fact the whole of the letter is building up to the verses we've just heard read

It's trying to get a sense of urgency into them

Urging them not to drift and meander but to run

Run towards their salvation

This is the race they are in –

the race of their lives and for their lives

We're in this race too

It's the race to Jesus.

Of course it's a marathon, not a sprint,

And we're not competing against each other

there's a prize for everyone who finishes.

It's all about staying the course and remaining faithful to the end.

The apostle Paul used this same imagery near the end of his life when he said:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"

So this letter challenges this Hebrew church, as it challenges us,

to run with perseverance the race of faith.

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Now, imagine what this church of Hebrews was like at the beginning of their race

when they first heard the gospel

Enthusiastic

Excited

determined

Full of energy

Then look at them now

They've certainly hit that wall haven't they?

Pain and tiredness has kicked in

They've slowed right down

They're drifting off the route

In danger of giving up completely.

I can relate exactly to what these Hebrews were going through

Well not exactly – I'm not from a Jewish heritage.

But I can remember very clearly the times in my life

when I've been on fire with the joy and the excitement of the gospel

Being in almost constant conversation with God

Wanting to read and understand more and more of the bible

Getting together with others to talk about Jesus

Looking for every opportunity to share the gospel

And then there have been those times when I've just been going through the motions

Doing the minimum of turning up at church most Sundays

But pretty much ignoring God for the rest of the week

Still plodding along

But with no energy and enthusiasm

Just ticking the box.

Those are the times when I needed someone to write me a letter like this

A letter that said “don’t sit back, don’t give in, don’t drift

Run,

And run with perseverance

Stay strong in your faith”

That’s what the writer is urging here.

And to accompany this imperative, this urging

He shows us where to find great encouragement.

The opening word “Therefore” takes us back to the previous chapter

which has talked about a number of old testament prophets

Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and countless others

many examples of people who, despite incredibly challenging circumstances

Or occasionally drifting off the path (remember David)

Held on to their faith.

It’s as if the writer is saying

Look, all these people have run their race

and they persevered, they finished.

And here they are as examples for you

They’re standing in the crowd urging you on

Saying look, we stayed strong and you can too.

But I like to shamelessly misinterpret this part of the passage as well

Because I also think of my church family as being in this cloud of witnesses

Because we witness to one another as well don't we

I'm sure there are people in our congregation you see as very strong in their faith

People you know who struggle with very difficult situations,

whether health or work or family related

But whose faith shines through, no matter what.

And at times during my 10km races,

I'd hear fellow runners encouraging me, urging me on

And that's how we need to be with one another

Keeping an eye out for anyone who may be flagging a bit

Or who may be drifting off course

We need to start running more closely with them,

Getting alongside them

Encouraging them to persevere

Being witnesses to them, in the same way as we have these biblical witnesses

So that's our first motivation to keep going –

knowing that there's a great crowd of faithful people who've either finished their race

or who are running along side us

urging us on in our own race

And then there's some good advice for us as we run our race

Look with me at the second part of vs 1

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles

Throw off everything that's weighing you down or holding you back

And keep on running

That concept of throwing everything off is actually quite challenging

Think again about those taking part in the Noosa tri

Or in any long distance event

They wear the minimum

They carry nothing

They don't want anything to hinder or distract them in their race

And that's the advice here

We need to get rid of any sin that is weighing us down

And of course we know that, don't we.

But we also need to get rid of anything that might hinder or distract us

This means things that are not of themselves sinful

But that distract us from where our focus should be.

How often do we make the excuse of not having time to read the bible

But you know, the endless non-urgent emails

Or those games on the iPad

or those TV series we're addicted to,

or that crazy game I play called Pickleball

I seem to have time for all of these things!

And, there's nothing wrong with things like this

except when they become a priority over reading the bible

or going to church

or going to connect group

Then they are a hindrance in our race and we need to throw them off.

This can be true of church life as well

If we're all worn out trying to keep up with all our church activities

Then maybe we have to cut some of them

So that we can remain focused on the main thing – Jesus.

That's an important thought as we head into the busy Christmas season.

So there's some good advice in this passage

We need to throw off everything that distracts or hinders us in our faith.

And then the writer says that we must run with perseverance.

How does any athlete persevere?

Well, they're highly disciplined, committing hours to their training

They don't just train once a week

They train every day

They resist junk food and focus on the right nourishment for their body

And they often have a coach or training partners

How about us?

Are we training as hard as we could?

Is our nourishment what it needs to be?

Do we seek out training partners or coaches?

I think you know what sort of things I'm getting at here

Bible reading, Prayer

Coming to church, Being a part of a Connect Group

These are the things we need to work on if we are to persevere in our race

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But with all that said,

what's the greatest advice and motivation for running with perseverance?

A complete and total focus on the goal, the prize, the finish line

Run with your eyes fixed on Jesus

Now, maybe a few of you here are old enough to remember when the 4 minute mile was finally broken

It was in 1954 in a race between a Brit (Roger Bannister) and an Aussie (John Landy)

Landy lead for most of the race, with Bannister close behind.

But, at the final turn, Landy looked over his left shoulder to check where Bannister was.

And what happened?

The British runner overtook the Australian and won the race.

Landy was distracted.

He took his eyes off the finish line and it cost him the race.

That's the risk for us, if we become distracted – it could cost us the race

So we need to have eyes only for Jesus

Not just because he's the finish line

He's also the perfect example, the perfect model.

Because he was perfect in his faith.

He knew the race that was marked out before him

He knew the suffering that lay ahead

The shame of the cross

The desperate horror of being separated from God

But still he kept faithful

Why?

Well, look at the second part of vs 2 *For the joy set before him*

The joy of remaining faithful and carrying out God's will

The joy of bringing glory to his Father

The joy of being raised from the dead to sit at God's right hand

And the joy of bringing sinners back into relationship with God.

By now it might be easy to hear the command, "Run the race!"

and conclude that finishing the race depends on us.

But that's not how it works.

The writer has something else in mind.

He says, "Look to Jesus - Consider him."

He is the foundation of our faith from start to finish.

He's not just our example,

He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

He's the reason we're in this race

The one who started the race for us,

The one who brought us into the race

the one who runs every step with us

the one who sustains us from start to finish

and the one who brings us to that final, perfect finishing line.

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So how's your race going?

Maybe you're still wavering at the start line

not sure whether or not to get going, to put your faith in Jesus.

How can we encourage you?

Maybe you've been running well but have perhaps got a bit distracted recently

What do you need to do to get back on track?

Is there someone else here who could run along side you for a bit, to help?

Maybe you're running well

keep it up but just make sure you keep your nutrition right

and your energy levels topped up.

However you're going – keep your eyes fixed on Jesus

as the beginning and the end,

the source of all energy and motivation.

Imagine what would happen if we looked to Jesus every day.

Everything that hinders us would fall off

Every sin would untangle from us.

Each look at Jesus would strengthen us to endure and finish well.

Every gasp for breath,

every twinge of pain,

every agonizing part of our race is worth patiently enduring

So that we get to the finish line — we to get to Jesus.

Let me pray

Father we praise you for the example we have in Jesus Christ, your Son. Thank you that such a faithful cloud of witnesses surrounds us! Help us, Father, to lay aside everything that hinders us, and the sin that so easily entangles us. Help us to run with perseverance the race that you have marked out for us. Strengthen us to fix our eyes on you and you alone, the author and perfecter of our faith. Thank you for hearing our prayer. Amen