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THE ULTIMATE MARATHON Proverbs 24:16

In 1983 a new and daunting race had its initial running in Australia. It was an ultramarathon race that involved running 544 miles from Sydney to Melbourne. I think the idea of running a marathon, 26 miles, is daunting. But that's child's play compared to running 544 miles. That seems almost super human to me, but people do it. Not long before the race was to begin a 61 year old farmer named Clifford Young showed up expressing the desire to enter the race. At first that seemed ludicrous. He was wearing overalls and boots, hardly the attire one would expect serious long distance runners to wear. And he was old! Was this some kind of stunt? No, he assured the organizers that he was quite serious and insisted on entering the race. There was no reason to deny him entrance so they took his entry fee, assigned him a number and pinned it on his overalls. There was some laughter when he lined up to start the race as some figured this was a joke. But the race began and he started off with the other runners, sort of. He had a gait that was not much more than an odd shuffle, quite different from the serious competitors around him. It didn't take long for him to lag far behind. At the end of the first day he trailed the pack by a large margin. However, 5 days, 15 hours and 4 minutes after the start of the race he crossed the finish line. To the astonishment of everyone, he crossed it before anyone else. He won the race, and not by a hair. The second place finisher arrived 9 hours and 56 minutes later! He beat his nearest competitor by almost 10 hours. It seems that no one had told Mr. Young that when you compete in an ultramarathon race you run for 18 hours then stop and sleep for several hours. He never stopped. He ran for 5 days and 15 hours without sleeping!

Young became an instant national hero in Australia due to his Tortoise and Hare victory. But it is obvious that he didn't win because of his superior athletic ability. His victory was the result of dogged persistence and perseverance. What we are going to discover today is perseverance is the key to mastering life, and Mr. Young is a classic illustration of that truth. Today we will consider the implications of Proverbs 24:16, which says, "Though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again."

PERSEVERANCE IS CRUCIAL FOR MASTERING LIFE

Proverbs is about how to master life. Remember also that there is a powerful connection in Proverbs between being righteous and being wise. The righteous

person is wise. So this verse essentially says the wise person falls seven times but rises each time. The righteous, or wise, person, the one who masters life, will fall, but gets up and keeps on going. That person perseveres.

Why seven times? In the Bible seven is the number of completion or fullness. So this verse says that even if the righteous person falls completely, totally, that person still gets back up and keeps going. This is saying the righteous person may trip or get knocked down more than anyone else on the planet, but they stubbornly get right back up and keep moving. They don't quit.

Our world recognizes the crucial importance of perseverance. President Calvin Coolidge said, "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence... The slogan, 'Press on,' has solved and will always solve the problems of the human race." Churchill said, "Success is not final, failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts." He also said, "Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm." Samuel Johnson said, "Great works are performed not by strength, but by perseverance." Victor Hugo called perseverance the secret of all triumphs. Charles Spurgeon said, "By perseverance the snail reached the ark."

There is a truth that comes through in this verse that we need to pay attention to. Failure and falling, getting knocked down are going to be a part of this life. The righteous are going to have that happen to them. They are not exempt because they are righteous. The key to mastering life is not giving up, not being defeated when we fall or are knocked down. We only master life when we learn to get up and keep going.

Steve Farrar wrote a book about persevering and titled it *Finishing Strong*. Its theme is this, "In the Christian life it is not how you start that matters, it's how you finish." In the book he relates the story of a well known pastor from Houston named John Bisagno. The father of his fiancée was also a pastor named John Beck. At one point his future father in law told Bisagno that he needed to stay true to the Lord and warned that only one in ten of his colleagues in ministry would stay faithful to the end. Bisagno didn't believe that. So when he went home he took out his Bible and wrote down on a blank page in the back the names of 24 men that he knew who were strong in ministry, totally committed to serving the Lord. He was sure those men would stay strong and faithful always. Unfortunately he was dismayed over the years as some of them began failing or quitting and he had to cross their names off. After 30 years only 3 of them were left.

Hebrews 12:1 commands us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” The course we are to run is laid out. There are chalk lines out there showing us the path to follow. But notice that this verse says we must run that race with perseverance. What does that tell you? It means that the race is not a sprint. It’s a distance race, a marathon. The key in such a race is not speed, but endurance. I have had a number of friends who have been dedicated runners. They talked about running until the endorphins kicked in and they felt that runner’s high. I never, ever experienced that. I liked running fast, sprinting. But pounding away mile after mile was never, ever fun. It was just hard. I hated that feeling of your lungs burning and your legs feeling weak and wobbly, everything kind of hurting and your whole body shouting at you, “Why are you doing this to me? Stop it, you idiot!” Here’s the really disappointing news. According to Hebrews 12:1 that’s what life will be like. It’s a long haul. It’s hard, and you are going to feel like quitting. You’ll feel that a lot. A crucial element of mastering life is not giving up. Keep going.

James 1:2-4 says we should consider it a joy when we go through hard times because that produces perseverance. Then it says, “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.” That is a crucially important statement. It says that the only way to be complete as a human, the only way to be mature as a follower of Jesus, is to persevere! In other words, it says what Proverbs 24:16 says. If you want to master life, you must persevere.

There was an interesting study done in which the researchers sought to find out why Japanese students consistently were much better at math than American students. People typically think that’s because they work harder, or their families drive them harder, or maybe it is some genetic pre-disposition. The researchers were surprised at what they discovered. The main factor was the Japanese students didn’t give up when they hit a roadblock or failed, whereas the Americans tended to quickly give up, saying they couldn’t do it because they just aren’t good at math.

You will never get an education, never learn a foreign language, never learn to play a musical instrument, never become good at a sport, never be in good shape physically, never build a joyful marriage, never raise healthy kids and never be mature spiritually, never walk with God for the long haul unless you persevere.

WE WILL HAVE AMPLE OPPORTUNITY TO QUIT

What might cause us to not persevere, to give up? Generally it is going to be hard things. If Laurie gives me a back rub I don’t need to persevere. I don’t find myself thinking, “Well, this is really difficult, but I need to keep pushing through.” Far

from it. I'm usually thinking, "Please don't stop." I don't need to persevere when eating a jelly doughnut. We only have to persevere when quitting seems much more desirable than continuing. Here are some of the things that will test our persistence. I think of them as the Fatal Four, because they hold the very real potential of making us give up.

Difficulties

Not long ago we decided we needed to change the light on the wall outside on the patio. We had put a light in there a long time ago, but it was never right. It kind of canted away from the wall at an angle because it didn't quite fit. For years we just ignored that until we decided it would be a simple thing to fix it. We bought a new one. Then we proceeded to replace it. We didn't proceed very far. For most people this is a simple task, but we found ourselves stumped by the instructions and just not sure how to make it work. We decided it was just too hard and we gave up. When things are difficult they can make you do that sometimes. There was a guy working on some other things at our house and we just paid him to do it.

That's not a big deal, but it is a reminder that when things are hard they can cause us to just give up. That's why people give up on diets, exercise regimes and New Year's resolutions. They are hard, and so they just quit. In Matthew 13 Jesus talked about how this happens to people in the spiritual realm at times. In verse 21 Jesus talked about how the Word of God could sometimes be received by people but, "since they have no root, they only last a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, they quickly fall away." It just gets too hard, so they give up.

There are many things we need to persevere at. Just maintaining a walk with God, being involved in ministry and trying to further the kingdom of God, loving a spouse and building a marriage, raising kids, trusting God. All of these things and many more will require perseverance because at some point they will be difficult. When you attempt them, you will be opposed. There is a spiritual enemy who will do everything he can to stop you, so the hard times will come.

Failure

When we've tried something and repeatedly failed, it becomes tempting to just give up. Laurie and I were at the beach one day this past summer and while we were there we watched several young boys trying to gain some proficiency in the skill of surfing. There was a great deal of futility happening. It reminded me of when Toby was in his teens and was trying to master surfing. I marveled at the

amount of patience and persistence he exhibited. He and his buddies would paddle out, wait for a wave, choose one and paddle hard to catch it, only to have it just ignore them and roll on by. They'd turn around and paddle out to try again. This happened a lot. Then they'd finally catch a wave, stand up on the board and immediately fall off. They would do this for hours, day after day. It was like watching Proverbs 24:16 lived out. Our righteous son fell 7 times, meaning totally, more than you could count. All this so that he could on a rare occasion actually stand up on the board and ride it for 4 or 5 seconds. He did this for weeks. It required impressive perseverance.

Every time I see good surfers I think I would really enjoy doing that. I've actually surfed a few times where I rode the wave successfully. But I can't surf, and there's one reason. I tried to learn a couple of times, but the constant failure made it not fun at all. It was just an ordeal. And eventually the failure caused me to think, "I will never be able to do this." So I gave up. I did not persevere.

That's all right because there is no great moral virtue in being able to surf. The problem is that in trying to live as a follower of Christ the same thing can happen. We fail continually to be what we know God wants us to be, and sometimes in spectacular ways. That can easily defeat us. We can get to the place where we think, "There's no hope for me." Enough of that kind of failure can cause us to give up.

What I am talking about is discouragement. That is one of our enemy's most effective weapons against us. That's why he is called the Accuser. He continually spotlights our weaknesses and failures, he flings them at us without stopping, shouting the whole time that we are frauds, we are useless and we are hopeless. The whole point is to get us to be so discouraged we just quit.

Read Paul's letters to Timothy. Timothy was a gifted and unique man. Paul said he had no one else like him. But at one point Paul sent Timothy to lead the church at Ephesus, and it didn't go well. People were following some flakes and shysters who were more charismatic than Timothy and he felt like he was not getting anywhere. One of the major themes of both of those letters is, "Timothy, don't give up. Don't give in to discouragement." In 1 Timothy 6:12 Paul told him to "fight the good fight." In 2 Timothy 2:1 he told him to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Over and over the message to him was to keep on, to endure, to not give up but to persevere.

Distractions

Too often we don't persevere at something because we get distracted. I once thought I would like to learn how to play the drums. Unfortunately, I didn't persevere in that one either. In that case it was not because of difficulty or failure. It was hard, but not as hard as surfing. The problem was that there were just too many other things going on in my life. Somehow something would always get in the way and I just didn't have the time to work on it.

The drum project began when we had our dog, Luke. I didn't have a drum set, I just had some sticks and pads I would use to try to learn with. But when I started hitting those pads Luke would start barking wildly. It was really distracting, so that was discouraging. But the biggest problem was there were always other things to do. So I did not persevere and the drum project died a quiet death. I have learned how to play the bass a little though. Doesn't that count for something?

In Matthew 13:22 Jesus warned that for some people, "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, making it unfruitful." In other words, people get so focused on the stress of this world or on making money that they lose sight of what matters. They get distracted from the main thing, and the quit.

Weariness

Galatians 6:9 says, "Let us not become weary in doing good." That is another factor that can cause us to give up. We just get tired. When I was fresh out of college I worked with a campus ministry for 4 years at mostly a large state university, but also did a little work at a junior college. I noticed an interesting effect at both schools. The first week of classes parking was a nightmare. Both schools were commuter schools and that first week you couldn't find a place to park in the same county as the campus. Even the second week it would get a little better. By the end of a semester it was no problem. Why was that? Because everybody showed up for classes that first week. But it wasn't long before people began dropping out, cutting classes, just not showing up. It's hard to keep at something for the long haul.

I've seen this in ministry a lot. We were just talking a few weeks ago to some friends who have been leading a ministry to couples. When they started 16 couples signed up, wanting to be involved. By the time they got near the end of the 10 week study the group had shrunk to 6.

People just get tired. And when they get tired, they quit. Laurie and I had a moment a couple of months back where this hit us. It was at a time when there was a sort of perfect storm of people in the church being unavailable. It was a combination of lots of things, work, vacations, illnesses and other distractions. One Sunday it was just like most everything in the church came down to, “Rick and Laurie can do it.” We were discouraged, and we were tired. This has been a demanding year for us for several reasons. And we had one of those moments where we said, “We’ve been carrying the ball for more than 39 years. That’s a long time. And now nobody’s blocking. We’re pooped.” There was a brief time where both of us sort of felt like, “We’ve done our share, so maybe we ought to just give up.” Fortunately we got over it fairly quickly. But being tired makes soldiering on hard.

THERE ARE RESOURCES THAT SUSTAIN US

It is no surprise to you that we can be affected by the Fatal Four. I know that at various points in your life you have been hindered or even defeated by each one of them, and you encounter them regularly. The bigger issue is, in light of this, how can we keep on keeping on? What can enable us to persevere when the thing we most want to do is just give up and go lie on the couch?

Live in God’s Grace

I’m going to confess what many will see as a weakness or a failing on my part. I’ve been a follower of Jesus for my entire adult life and have served in ministry for most of it. At this point my adult life adds up to a lot of years. Throughout those many years I have encountered many programs for Christian growth and discipleship. I’ve gone through quite a few of them. When I look back on them I find that they involved a lot of effort and discipline, but they didn’t make me the flawless spiritual giant that was the obvious intention. Usually they left me with a vague sense that I fall short of what I ought to be. And I find that the thought of continuing the program is tiring and burdensome.

Here is what I do know. Our efforts to improve ourselves typically tend to cause us to measure how we’re doing and to somehow try to measure up to some standard. This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t seek to be better, but it reminds us this has nothing to do with how God sees us. It has nothing to do with the fact that God began the work in us, and he will finish it. What we most need is to see ourselves and our relationship with God 100% through the lens of his grace given to us by Jesus Christ. When we do that we will be able to keep going when we fail or fall

short, because our failings are no threat to our relationship with God or our value as his children. Grace is absolutely essential for continuing.

Our little granddaughter, Ella, loves coloring. While she and Cara stayed with us for about 10 days we gave her a PJ Masks coloring book and a Mickey's Roadster Racers coloring book. She spent a lot of time coloring those. Especially when she first started her efforts were, well, let's just say they weren't quite ready to be hung in the Louvre in Paris. But we loved what she did. We praised her for her efforts. We didn't praise them because they were by anyone's standards beautiful works of art. We praised them because we love her beyond our words to express, and because she's precious to us.

Understand that she wasn't loved by us because of the merit of her work. We applauded her efforts because she is loved by us. We aren't loved by God because of the merit of our efforts. God applauds our efforts because he already loves us, so even the most feeble acts of faith are things of joy to him. We praised Ella because we want her to keep trying. We want her to know we value what she does. In other words, to us her work was wonderful by grace, and that's all we want her to experience. Because of that she loved to keep on coloring, to keep trying, keep going. What do you think would have happened if we insisted on her creating great coloring art and criticized her when she failed? She would have given up on coloring and would have felt like she failed. Instead she felt loved and encouraged, and was able to keep coloring with joy and enthusiasm. And that's how God relates to us. Are our lives true works of art, deserving on their own merit of hanging in the art gallery of heaven? No, but they are the efforts of God's beloved children. As we see all we do through the lens of grace rather than being defeated by our shortcomings we will be encouraged to keep on going. Grace is what keeps us from being defeated by failure and discouragement.

Focus On The Goal

In Philippians 3:13-14 Paul wrote, "One thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." This is a sports metaphor, appropriate for our subject. Paul is alluding to being in a race. When you're in a race you have to focus on the goal, on the finish line. You can't be looking around, wondering if maybe you ought to get off the track and go to the concession stand and get a hot dog. Paul pictures himself on the home stretch of the last lap, seeing the tape across the finish line up ahead. He focuses totally on that and strains with all his might to reach it. Nothing else matters, just reach the goal.

For us, the goal is to be what Christ calls us to be, to live for his glory and to be faithful for him to the very end. Paul says we should forget about what's in the past. Look forward, focus on that goal. This is what can keep us from the distractions that might divert us and cause us to quit.

There is a guy mentioned in the Bible that I want to never be like. In 2 Timothy 4:10 Paul wrote, "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica." Paul was in prison, again, and this time his imprisonment would end with his execution. Demas had been one of Paul's men, one of his co-workers. But Demas took his eyes off the goal. He saw where things were heading. It was hard and was going to end badly, and he feared if he stuck with Paul he would suffer the same fate that awaited Paul. That was a reasonable fear, for Nero was known for irrational violence. He forgot what his real goal was. He got distracted, thinking his goal was self preservation. And he bailed out. Paul said he deserted him. That's a powerful word. To desert means to abandon your post, usually out of fear, and that's exactly what Demas did. For all time he will be known as Demas the Deserter. He forgot what his true goal was. We need to see ourselves as being on a mission, and must never lose sight of it.

We were up at Toby and Anna's House, in the backyard with the girls and the dogs. I was tossing a ball for their dog Banjo to retrieve. Banjo is the classic dog who focuses on doing something, but then... squirrel! I was just about to toss the ball when a quail took off from a bush nearby. Banjo darted after the bird, which was long gone, barking like a crazy dog. Ball? What ball? It occurred to me we often are like him. We identify the mission of serving God, but suddenly along comes approval, money, success, status, and we dart after it barking like crazy dogs.

Believe

Romans 15:5 refers to God as "the God who gives endurance and encouragement." Colossians 1:11 Paul prayed that we might be "Strengthened with all power according to his (God's) glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience." Those verses promise that God can and will give us the strength to endure, to persevere. The only question for us is will we believe it? Will we trust that God can actually give us what we need to stand firm and stay the course?

We are going to have to have faith and believe God for two things. First, we will need faith to believe that it will be worth it, that persevering in doing God's will in

fact is the best. And second, we will need faith to believe that God is actually present and can give us the strength we need to keep going. We need to believe that the power of the Holy Spirit is real. Pastor and author, Francis Chan, said, “we live in a time when people, even in the church, don’t believe in the power of the Holy Spirit and what he can do.” He said we see the Holy Spirit working in people in the Bible and think, “well, that was back then. It’s not for today.” The Holy Spirit is eternal God, he is for always. Chan says the early believers had a fearlessness. It was because there was a confidence in them that “my God will come through.” We need to get back to that same confidence, believing that the Spirit of God will come through for us and enable us to stand.

Psalm 37:24 says, “The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.”

Look At Jesus

We saw earlier that Hebrews 12:1 calls us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” But verses 2-3 gives us a key component for being able to do that. “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he 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 sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Keep remembering Jesus, who endured infinitely more than the worst you or I will ever have to face. He stayed the course, and in the end won the victory. Keep looking at Jesus.

In 2 Timothy 4:7 Paul wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race.” 1 Corinthians 9 speaks of running the race to win. Hebrews 12 tells us to run the race with perseverance. Do you get the message? We are in a race. It is not a sprint. It is not a relay. It is a marathon. It will last our entire lives. To win a marathon you don’t need more strength or more ability than anyone else. You mostly need one thing. You need perseverance.

Toby and Anna had to leave their girls with us for about 10 days. Little Cara had just started walking a little when they left. Anna said she felt like she left a baby and came home to a toddler because now Cara was walking all over the place. Much of that change happened at our house. It wasn’t a completely smooth and linear progression. On many occasions Cara would be walking in that sort of Frankenstein gait of the toddler and then fall. Often she’d land on her little rear

end. Frequently when that happened she would start wailing. She felt she had somehow been treated unfairly, some great tragedy had befallen her. Her best course of action she felt was to sit there on the ground and howl against the injustice that had been visited upon her. Numerous times I would say to her, “Cara, you’re fine. You don’t need to cry. You’re not hurt. Just stand up and keep going.” She wasn’t being treated unfairly. She wasn’t a total failure. She wasn’t worthless because she fell. The project of learning to walk wasn’t hopeless. This was just part of the process and she just needed to get back up and keep going.

I think it interesting that the Bible often refers to our living as followers of Jesus as a walk. We should hardly be surprised if our walking involves some failing, some falling. The right thing to do is not sit down and wail because we aren’t being treated fairly or because there’s no hope or because we look bad. We just need to get back up and keep walking.