

7. When Christians Win the Christian Race, the Church Grows

The Bible uses many metaphors to help us understand what our Christian responsibility is and how to succeed to the very end. When Christians succeed, the church succeeds. Christians are fighting the good fight in 1 Tim. 6:12: "12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses." Christians are also soldiers, athletes, and farmers for the Lord. Paul teaches in 2 Tim 2:3-7:

3 Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer. 5 Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. 6 The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. 7 Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

However, the metaphor in Heb. 12:1-3 aptly portrays Christians as running a race:

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, 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. 2 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. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The lessons are clear!

Throw off Everything That Hinders

When Christians run the race, they dress for it. They must get rid of the sin that so easily entangles them. Members should not be shocked when sin entangles them. Rather, they must set it aside and continue to run toward the goal line. The sin will be all along the path that Christians run. Jesus admonished in Matt 26:41: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

Run with Perseverance the Race Marked out for Us

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. The Christian race is not a sprint—fast out of the blocks and over quickly. It is a long race that continues our entire lives. Endurance, not speed, is the secret. No sudden burst of righteous energy will see us through. The race calls for continuous effort sustained over a lifetime. Rev. 2:10 admonishes us:

10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

One need only imagine a real race where the runner is weak, legs hurting, and lungs bursting to understand that the Christian race requires perseverance under hardship. Think of a congregation where all the members stick with it no matter what. Paul wrote in 1 Cor 15:58, "58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Fix Our Eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of Our Faith

When running the Christian race, each member of the congregation must fix upon Jesus, allowing him to perfect our faith. From the strength thus gained by the members, the congregation will grow. The apostle Paul held this goal in sight in Phil 3:12-14

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on

to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Because of this focus on Christ Jesus, Paul could declare victory at the end of his life in 2 Tim 4:7-8:

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Consider Him Who Endured Such Opposition from Sinful Men

Our power and the power of the church come from this focus on Christ. The opposition that he endured is far beyond what we confront. Peter rehearsed the suffering of Jesus and his stand against provocation in 1 Peter 2:21-25:

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

22 "He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

This power from the Lord is what sees us through the pain of the race we run. Peter concluded in 1 Peter 4:12-16:

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

Do Not Grow Weary and Lose Heart

The danger for every Christian and every congregation is that they grow weary in the race and lose heart. Quitting and backsliding are the dangers to us all. If we stay focused on Christ and on his hardship, and if we finish the race, we will receive the crown of life, which the Lord will award us. In Rom 12:2, Paul charged, "2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Conclusion

The promises to those who finish the Christian race are clear, abundant, and great. Rev 3:4-5 teaches:

4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.