

When I first came to Concordia College as a freshman and went out for the Cross Country team, the coach sent us out on long runs as a team. It was easy for the faster runners to get out in front of the rest of us. The coach made sure that all of us keep running by having the faster runners circle back and pick up the slower runners that way everyone finished the run. He taught us how to encourage each other. That helped us become a better team. The same is true for us as Christians. We are all in the race of faith together. God doesn't want us to give up.

The author of the letter to the Jewish (Hebrew) Christians wrote about the race of faith. These Christians were facing persecution for their faith and were tempted to give up. The author told them, **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith.”** (12:1) He wrote about those witnesses in chapter 11. The witnesses were the men and women in the time before Christ who finished their race in faith. He wrote about Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph, Moses and the Israelites who escaped Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. He wrote about Rahab who hid the Israelites spies and Joshua who led the Israelites into the Promised Land. He told them about martyrs of the faith who were all part of the cloud of people cheering them on. He reminds us how important it is for us to know the Christian faith story.

In most endurance races, the cheering crowd is either at the start or the finish lines. Hebrews tells us that we are not alone in our faith race. We are surrounded by those who have already finished the race encouraging us by their example to keep going. There is so much we can learn about how to face our own challenges from how God helped them face theirs.

The author continued, **“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.”** (12:1) Before starting a long race, a runner will take off any unnecessary warm up clothing, getting rid of all the extra weight that could slow them down.

Christians need to do the same thing because the race of faith is a lifelong endurance race. We know that there are so many things that can get in our way, distract us, slow us down or even tempt us to drop out. We usually think of the struggles that we face that make it hard to follow Jesus. But they are not the only things that can get in our way and trip us up.

Sometimes it is the good things that distract us, that occupy our time and pull us away from the Lord. What are the kind of things that slow us down? One is overcommitment, being so busy that our lives are out of balance. It happens in families when the kids and parents are doing so many different things that they never get to spend time as a family. It can happen to us when we find it hard to spend time with the Lord praying and reading His Word. A lie says we can have it all. We can't. Trying to have it all, do it all, can pull us away from the Lord. We may need to eliminate some things from our lives for the sake of our families and of our faith. If we don't, the so called “good things” may so dominate our time that we don't have time for the best with our family and with our Lord.

Sin can also trip us up. If we recognize the things that tempt us, we can try to avoid them with the Holy Spirit's help. Alcoholic need to stay away from the bars and keep alcohol out their houses. The person with a gambling problem needs to stay away from a casino and take the gaming apps off their electronic devices. The person who has a problem with pornography needs to block the so called "mature" items on their electron devices be careful about the things they watch. The person who struggles with gossip needs to stay away from social media that turn into gossip sites. Get the idea?

Why should we do this? So that we can run with endurance the race God has set before us! God does not want any of us to drop out. He wants us to endure so that we can finish the race. Since we have not crossed the finish line yet, it is too soon for any of us to quit.

How do we do this? The author tells us, **"We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith."** (12:2) Jesus is watching out for us. He encourages us to keep running with Him in faith.

Life was not easy for Jesus. His family did not understand Him. The people in his hometown rejected Him. The religious leaders of Israel opposed Him. His closest friends abandoned Him. The Roman Governor condemned Him. Jesus endured all of this for us, to make it possible for us to rejoin God's family. Jesus tells us that living as Christians will not be easy. But He does promise always to be with us. When we keep our eyes on Jesus we do not lose sight of our goal.

My cross-country coach taught us not to look back to see if anyone was catching up with us because we were taking our eyes off the finish line. He also told us that if the runner in front of us looked back, we should be able to catch him. The runner was more afraid of being passed than pushing ahead to finish the race. Remember those early practices where the coach had us make sure no one was left behind. They paid off in our races, because our teammates would encourage each other to keep going when we felt like slowing down. We need to the same for our fellow Christians. We need to make sure that no one is left behind.

Our coach taught us to focus on the finish line. We need to focus our eyes on Jesus. He is the one who called us to the race and is waiting for us at the end of the race cheering us on. We live with our eternal goal in sight.

Maeve was baptized just a few minutes ago. Her family came today to witness and be part of this special day. Thank you for being here. Her parents promised to raise their daughter in the Christian faith. Her sponsors made the commitment to pray for her and help her grow as a child of God. And all of us promised to help, support and encourage her and her parents. We are both witnesses and part of the cheering crowd. Some day you may be able to tell her that you were here when she was baptized into the Christian faith.

We need to do the same for each other. We need each other. Jesus calls us into His family. It is hard to be a Christian all on your own. We need to help, support, encourage, and celebrate with each other. The Christian Church is the family of believers. We are the body of Christ. We are the Church. We are God's people. We need each other. God has called us together. It is about we, not about me. We are running together on team Jesus.