

CROSS THE FINISHING LINE!

Today's Text: 1 Cor. 9:19-27

Extracts:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight; not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified [1 Cor. 9: 24-27]

The 1992 Olympic Summer Games in Barcelona, Spain, was Derek Redmond's moment to win the 400 metres race for Britain.¹ At the age of 19 (1985), he had set the British record in that event, a feat that was not broken until 1992. In 1988, at the Seoul Olympics, he was forced to withdraw from the race ten minutes before time due to an Achilles tendon injury. He underwent five surgeries over the next one year. 1992 was thus his hope for redemption. He had reached the semi-finals and was about to qualify for the finals. When the race started, Derek was at the head of the pack. But just 175 metres away from the finishing line, he tore his hamstring and fell to the track. When the medical crew arrived with a stretcher, he refused help, insisting, "I'm going to finish my race!" With tears in his eyes and pain in his limbs, he limped on. His father broke through security and came to help his son. A few steps to the finishing line, Jim left his son to cross it alone, to the admiration of the 65,000 fans around the venue.

Derek did not win the event but he crossed the finishing line. Today, he is more remembered than the person who won that race. He has demonstrated that the triumph of the human spirit over any odds is an essential part of the Olympics and, indeed of life in general. How about you? You are trying to achieve a worthy cause in your family, career, business or ministry. Each time you try to reach the final stage, you get stuck. The end is so close but you find it almost impossible to cross the finishing line. Well, Paul has an answer for you in this week's study. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he has given us leading ideas on what to do to be able to cross the finishing line and win the race to eternal life. Let us find out more on the matter.

¹ Story is based on: Rick Weinberg, "Derek and dad finish Olympic 400 together," Special to ESPN.com No. 94, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/espn25/story?page=moments/94> and "Derek Redmond," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derek_Redmond

1. Background: Paul strives to cross the finishing line for the eternal crown

The children of Israel were a few weeks to stepping into the Promised Land (Canaan), the place that they and their ancestors had for over four hundred years of bondage in Egypt longed to enter. They had seen how God miraculously split the Red Sea open for them to cross on dry ground. So, as they were about to enter the new land, Moses sent twelve spies to go and do a reconnaissance so as to have a better knowledge of their new home. But ten of the twelve spies brought an evil report to show why they should not enter there! The then inhabitants of the land were giants, so they reported; they were too strong for the children of Israel. The land devoured its inhabitants [**Num. 13: 1-33**]. The people cried and revolted against Moses and Aaron, saying, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in the wilderness! ... Let us select a leader and return to Egypt!” [**Num. 14: 1-4**]. They were afraid to cross the finishing line that opened the door to a land flowing with milk and honey [**Ex. 3: 8**]. Many of us are in that position right now.

For example, you have been praying and fasting for God to lead you to your dream husband. Then a close friend asks you to join her at a bachelor’s party. You refuse and remain an active member of your “all-girls’ club” of gossipers! Where do you think you will ever find Mr. Right? You take courses at school but never present yourself for the exams. How are you going to be certified? You go to church religiously but you are not keen on living like a true believer. How are you going to get saved?

Paul was concerned about the attitude of worshippers in the church in Corinth to the race for salvation and wondered why they did not seem to be keen on crossing the finishing line. To enable him to convey his message more clearly, he decided to use the analogy of an athletic event- racing. Here are the key points that he drew their attention to:

a) There are many competitors but only one winner

Paul wrote, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it” [**1 Cor. 9: 24**]. At the Olympics which feature athletes from over 200 countries every leap year, there are thousands and thousands of competitors for long races (such as the Marathon) and the sprints (such as the 100 metres dash). Every competitor must cross the finishing line before s(he) is considered to have participated at all. However, the winner is the first to breast the tape. They give a gold medal to the first, silver to the second and bronze to the third. The rest go home empty-handed!

Even so, competitors go there with different goals or aspiration levels. For example, some are pacers, that is, those who help others to win by burning out competition against them. For example, young Kenyan middle and

long distance runners were alleged to play that role for their stars and mentors, such as Kip Keino, a two-time Olympic gold medalist.² They would dash ahead and set a punishing pace for unsuspecting runners from other countries. Their mentors would lurk behind favoured rivals from other countries. By the time the race would be getting to the last lap, the pacers would drop to the back while their energised mentors would spring forward and cross the finishing line ahead of everybody else! On their retirement, the pacers would take over in subsequent Olympics.

Some of us play the pacer's role in our places of worship. For example, Isaiah addresses them as people who draw near God with their mouths and honour Him with their lips but have removed their hearts far from Him, and their fear of God "is taught by the commandment of men" [Is. 29: 13]. They can and do win souls for Christ but why are they not interested in winning the race for themselves?

b) *Every competitor prepares hard*

Paul wrote, "And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things" [1 Cor. 9: 25a]. In other words, ***you have to prepare hard to even qualify***. The organizing committee sends out to all participating countries the minimum standards for all the events. To qualify to represent your country at the Olympics, you must compete at your national trials and post the best performance. Therefore, it takes a great deal of hard work and self-discipline. ***In the race for salvation, how many of us care about what it takes to compete to win the prize? Many of us hide under the canopy of grace but, as Paul has cautioned, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!" [Rom. 6:1-2].*** So, we need to find out what "hard work" we are required to do so as to be temperate in all things.

c) *Nevertheless the ultimate prize is perishable*

Paul wrote, "Now [those who compete for the prize] do it to obtain a perishable crown but we for an imperishable crown" [1 Cor. 9: 25b]. At the Olympics, they give you medals (gold, silver or bronze) which are perishable. No matter for how long you can preserve them, they cannot last forever. So, what is the "imperishable crown" that Paul has carefully led his readers to pay attention to?

That imperishable crown is so precious to Paul that he runs "but not with uncertainty"; he fights but "not as one who beats the air." He disciplines his body and brings it into subjection, lest, after he has preached to others, he himself should become disqualified [vv. 26-27].

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kipchoge_Keino

Now, we know that Paul has merely used the analogy of athletics to lead his readers to the very important subject of crossing the finishing line in the race to salvation, that is, eternity with Jesus Christ in His Father's house in heaven [Jn 14: 1-3]. Now, we are in a position to understand and appreciate how we can run and win that race.

2. Lessons for today's runners to eternity

With reference to running the race to eternal life, here are some important lessons to learn from the foregoing:

a) *It is not a zero-sum race!*

In human races, the first to breast the tape, all things being equal, is the winner and the rest are losers. That is what is called a zero-sum game. You-win-I-lose or I-win-you-lose. Both of us cannot win at the same time. ***The race to salvation is not like that. Each race is for one person at a time!*** The word of God says, "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul that sins shall die" [Ezek. 18: 4]. ***When your race is called, there is only one lane- yours! You are the only one on the starting block. Jesus is waiting for you on the finishing line, with His angels holding the tape!***

It follows that you are on your own. Your parents cannot do it for you. Your church or denomination cannot do it for you. No priest or pastor or prophet can do it for you. As the word of God has put it, "So then each of us shall give account of himself [herself] to God" [Rom. 14; 12], and "They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" [1 Pet. 4: 5]. ***Therefore, get ready to run the race by yourself. You must cross that finishing line by yourself!***

b) *There is no world record to set or to break!*

In human races, your victory is determined by your speed and your speed depends on the distance. For example, the world record for the 100 metres dash is less than ten seconds; much shorter than the record time for the Marathon [26.22 miles or 42.20 km] that is well under three hours. But in the case of the race to salvation, there is no record to set or break! ***How fast can you go to reach eternity? When are you likely to get there? Only God knows.*** That is why the word of God makes it quite clear that a thousand years in His sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night. We may have the grace to live for up to seventy or eighty years but "it is soon cut off, and we fly away" [Ps. 90: 4, 10].

If that is the case, you only have ***now*** to run your race because tomorrow may be too late for "Today, if you will hear His voice: do not harden your

hearts, as in the rebellion” [Ps. 95: 7-8]. ***You can be called to cross the finishing line in childhood or at old age. Therefore, make each day you can wake up an opportunity that God has given you to cross the finishing line to salvation.***

c) *The standard will not be lowered for any runner!*

Whether you stroll in or sprint does not impress God. What matters to Him is whether you meet the standard which is applicable to all the runners for “God shows no partiality. But ***in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him***” [Acts 10: 34-35], and “God shows personal favouritism to no man” [Gal. 2: 6].

Therefore, do not be deceived by those who may tell you that Bible standards are old-fashioned. They are not; they are ageless because Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever [Heb. 13: 8], and God remains the LORD; He changes not [Mal. 3: 6]. The same way He judged Sodom and Gomorrah [Gen. 19: 1-29] thousands of years ago is the same way He will judge modern sodomites.

There is nothing like incarnation because “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” [Heb. 9: 27]. In the Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus, the rich man from the depths of hell begged Abraham (up in heaven) to send messengers to the earth to testify to his five brothers “lest they also come to this place of torment.” But Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets [i.e., the Scriptures of Jesus’ time on earth]; let them hear them” [Lk 16: 14-31]. All Scripture [Genesis-Revelation] has been given by God’s inspiration and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and for instruction in righteousness “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” [2 Tim. 3: 16-17]. So, you have no excuse. The standard will not be lowered for you or anybody else!

d) *You have no control over when the race will end!*

Every Olympics event has a fixed time to begin and end. In fact, by the time they do the closing ceremony, all the events have been completed. It is not so with the race to salvation. It began from the days of Adam over seven thousand years ago and it will continue until Christ returns. ***Each second, somebody’s race is ending and another’s is starting. Therefore, you must prepare any moment to cross your finishing line because “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night”*** [2 Pet. 3: 10]. That is why you must watch and pray because you do not know when the master of the house is coming-“in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning- lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping” [Mk 13: 35-37].

Now, you can see why Paul warned his readers who are running for an imperishable crown, “I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” [1 Cor. 9: 26-27]. Elsewhere, he added, “I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead. *I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus ... for our citizenship is in heaven*, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” [Phil. 3: 13-14, 20]. You do not want to die as a coach or mentor who led others to Christ but did not work for own salvation. The soul that sins shall die. Each one will answer for his/her life on that day. *Everyone will cross the finishing line – but to where? It is either to eternity in heaven or everlasting torment in hell. That is Paul’s emphatic message for us this week.*

3. Conclusion: Let Jesus help you across the finishing line!

In Olympic records, Derek was disqualified because his father, Jim, assisted him to cross the finishing line. But today, he is better known and more honoured than the athlete who won that semi-final 400 metres heat. In like manner, we have been crippled by sin, inherited or self-inflicted, but we are trying to limp past the finishing line to salvation. However, it is not by works of righteousness that we will be saved “but according to [the Lord’s] mercy ... that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” [Titus 3: 5-7]. So, like Derek, we need help across the finishing line.

Jesus has said, “Without Me you can do nothing” [Jn 14: 5]. Therefore, *for you to successfully cross that finishing line and make it to heaven, you need Jesus by your side as your Lord and Saviour* [Rom. 10: 9-10] and Advocate with the Father [1 Jn 2: 1]. Are you heavy-laden? Come to Him; He will make your burden light and give you rest [Matt. 11: 27-30]. He will never leave you nor forsake you [Heb. 13: 5]. He will be with you always even to the end of the age [Matt. 28: 20]. As a result, you are assured that, on that day when you cross your finishing line, Jesus will be there to receive you, saying, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” [Matt. 25: 34]. That is your imperishable crown.

Alleluia!