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Sermon Transcript: Running the Race

I was going through my closet recently and found this. They're my track shoes from high school. Still got the spikes in them from the last track meet that I ever ran, which was years ago.

Yes, I know this is—this is probably really hard for a lot of you to believe, and certainly anyone who played softball with me years ago here at the church will have a hard time believing this too, but I was once very fast. Don't laugh, Andy! I was—it really—it's true. When I entered high school, I was the fastest on the freshman track team. I was at the top. I loved running. I loved sprinting. As long as it wasn't any more than one lap, I could handle it and I was good at it. And things went great in the beginning.

But then the years went by and the other kids did stuff like practice, weightlifting, stretching, building up their stamina. I was the kid who like, kind of like they say, "Okay, now we're going to stretch," and I just kind of like didn't do it. Or I was the one who would complain when they say, "All right, now we're going to have everybody run three miles." And I'm like, "I never run more than once around the track in a race. Why do I have to run three miles?"

And Norm Armstrong, a member of this congregation who was the head track coach at the time, said, "It's good for you, Rob. It'll—it'll build up your stamina, you know, and that way when you're making that last turn, you'll have that extra gas." It's not that I think Stormin' Norman lied; I just didn't think he was right. Surely he was just misunderstood and all I needed to do was to run. Give me a track and 11 seconds and let's go and see what happens.

But as the years went on, I went from being the fastest to the second fastest to the third fastest. I ended up somewhere around fourth to fifth fastest on the track team, which, I mean, that's still pretty good for a kid who didn't do all the stuff he was supposed to do. But I just didn't like the discipline of it. I didn't like the hard work. I just wanted to run the race.

Isn't that the way we do a lot of life, especially our spiritual lives? Putting in the discipline, putting in the hard work, the things that are going to build up what we need—the skills and the stamina that we need for this life of faith? Can't we just do it? We get tired from other pursuits instead.

The Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith

The passage today in Hebrews as we continue on starts off with, "Therefore." That tells you everything that we've been talking about so far leads up to explain what I'm about to tell you. And if you remember previously in Hebrews, it's talking to an audience that's been persecuted, that's been beaten down. They are tired. They are worn out. They are out of energy.

And in the previous chapter we talked about last week, you get this roll call of the great saints of the church who actually just seem like the great mess-ups of the church. They have a faith that's

imperfect. And yet their faith is part of that great cloud of witnesses that stands around us. You see, the race of faith is not always about being perfect; it's about getting back in that race again and again.

The passage says there is One who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith: that's Jesus Christ. You want to know how to run the race? You follow him. Follow that example. Take the time to not just kind of know what Jesus did, but to really study the scriptures, to make a connection and a knowledge about Christ so important in your life that it informs how you look and how you run this race of life. Because there is One who was the pioneer and the perfecter of it, and simply looking to that example can teach us so much.

It goes on in the passage to talk about, yes, but it's—it's not going to be easy for you. There is kind of an unhelpful verse—I don't know if you caught it, verse four—but basically it said like, look, it's not like you're bleeding or anything. That's the Rob Dyer translation of verse four that we read, but it said like, it's not like you've exercised the faith to the point where you've had to shed blood. I don't know if that gives us a lot of comfort, but it's there.

And then it goes on to say that there's a need for discipline, and that God even uses the—the unfortunate circumstances of your life to work a lesson of discipline. That's hard to sometimes hear because some of us have been through really difficult times in our lives. And sometimes you can wonder, "Oh, is this—is this just something that these bad things have happened? Is this God testing me?" And sometimes it's just life happens to you. But what we do know is that God can use these moments to form you, just as God can use your efforts of a regular discipline of faith to have a life where you actually do read the scriptures, to have a life where your prayer life is often and frequent and you've cultivated it, and it's not just something that you reach out for at the last minute. Our faith, our prayer life, our connection with scripture, our understanding of the life of Jesus—it's not just meant to be a glass cabinet that we break in times of emergency. It's meant to be something that's just part of our lives, part of the routine, such that when it comes time to run those difficult parts of this race of life, you've got that stamina that you need. You've done the hard work. You've stretched yourself. You've built up your faith along the way.

The Races That Don't Save Us

But so many times we get busy running other races. We let the world distract us. We let other things come in. I can tell you this: that this life of faith that we have to live, it might be blessed by other pursuits, but it's not defined, and it's certainly not redeemed, and it's certainly not saved by a lot of those.

I can tell you that when I was in college and my grandfather, whom I loved dearly, who was like a second father to me, when he was in his final days and he died, it was not the fact that I was on the varsity track team that got me through it.

When I got into a terrible car accident and I was having memory problems and I wasn't sure that my brain was going to function well for the rest of my life because I couldn't remember things for a

while—and that was really scary—and you know what? The fact that I was valedictorian at Belleville West did not help me get through that moment, with all the effort I put into that achievement. It is not what got me through that moment.

When later in life, and my wife and I were trying to have kids and it just didn't look like it was going to be possible, and then finally, finally we got pregnant, and then we lost that child in a miscarriage—the fact that I had run the race and climbed the corporate ladder at OPNET Technologies and was on track to become vice president of consulting, do you think that helped me in that moment?

It was not the race on the track, or the race in the classroom, or the race in my job that got me through those moments. It was running through the hallways at Westminster Presbyterian Church. It was listening to Helen Grant teach me the books of the Bible. It was looking at the saints of the faith who held on to their faith during the most difficult times in their lives. It was seeing people love one another so well that you couldn't deny that the Spirit of God was just flowing throughout my life because I got part of that race. Norm Armstrong was a great coach out on the track, but I'll tell you what: in Fellowship of Christian Athletes is where he made the impact in my life and shaped me so that I would be prepared for the days that I lost people, that I felt scared, that I felt like my dreams and my future were just not going to happen. It was the faith that I invested in and that invested in me that pulled me through those days.

You know, we just lost one of those really amazing saints of the faith in Tom Hudson. Those of you who did not get a chance to know Tom Hudson in your time of being here at this church, you missed something. Tom is a man of incredible faith. And in these last few weeks when he was facing the cancer that was just spreading throughout his body, this is what he said to me: He said, "Rob, I'm fine. Everybody gets a birth and everybody gets a death, and I'm grateful to God for all that came in between." Do you think that core was there because of all that he accomplished on a football field when he was in high school? Do you think that core of faith and that confidence in the Lord happened because of what he accomplished in his professional life?

Look, I'm not saying you can't learn so much from activities and sports. You can learn so much from doing great in a job, from doing well academically. I don't want to downplay that. Those are good races to run, but not at the expense of not showing up for the race of your faith. Not at the expense of giving up on that which is actually going to hold you and sustain you in some of the darkest moments of your life.

The Cloud of Witnesses Along the Track

I don't need these anymore. You don't want to see what it looks like when I try to run in these anymore. But I know that what—what God has poured into my heart through the cups of a great cloud of witnesses in my life, I know that that is something that I'm going to need to dip into again and again. And I cannot live without that. I don't need to be a runner. I don't need to have any

certain degrees. I don't need to have accomplished any certain thing in my career. But I need Christ. I need that relationship.

One of the things I loved about the East St. Louis track team was the way they supported one another. You know, some people when they run track, it's just they're focused on their race and they got their headphones on and they're in their zone. And when they're done with their race, they're off and they're rehydrating and whatever. But this team was a team together. And whenever they had one of their middle distance or long distance runners—you know, where they had to do several times around the track—when they would get to the last lap, the entire team would get up and they would line the side of the track for their teammate and they would start up this cheer, giving that gift to their teammate:

"Breathe, run, run, run. Breathe, run, run. Breathe, run, run."

Right to get that rhythm. And sometimes as it got to the final bit, they'd speed up to encourage—to be a cloud of witnesses for their teammate.

And that's what we're called to do, because sometimes it's hard to lay down the weight and the sin in our life. And remember that from the verse: it didn't just say, "Oh, you got to put aside the sin in your life." Not everything that you need to set aside is sinful. I don't think it was sinful that I ran track. I don't think it was sinful that I worked so hard in my academics. I don't think it was sinful that I was good at my job in the software industry. I don't think that was sinful. But sometimes we have to at least set the weight down for a period of time, or there's something in your life where it just can't be the full weight you carry. You got to drop some of it off so you've got the ability to run the race that's been set before you—the race that's going to give you life.

Now, what I know is that there are people in this room right now that have that weight on them. Maybe it's sin, but maybe it's just a weight. You don't see how to fit this in. You don't see how to work it in. Maybe you don't feel it enough to motivate yourself. There's a weight upon you. Or maybe there's just circumstances, or pain, or loss, or grief, and it's just heavy on you. And what you need most of all is not so much to have a coach or a pastor who yells at you to get out there and run that race. What you need is a great cloud of witnesses that's willing to stand up and cheer.

Do you think you can do that right now? Well, then stand up and join me, 'cause there's somebody that needs encouragement. Somebody in this room needs encouragement. What about if you could be that for them? If you need encouragement, if you need help, you're in a place that's ready to be there, cheering you on, pushing you forward, because the race that we're running together is worth it. And it will always be worth it. And you don't have to hang those cleats up. You get to wear those all the way through and beyond.

Hallelujah. Amen.