

## “Sprints and Marathons” October 11, 2009

A pastor friend of mine who lives in Dayton, Ohio, and who is part of my “Mavericks”—a group of 12 pastors from across the United States who gather to encourage and enliven one another in our ministries, is also someone who has begun running marathons. In fact, when I wrote this message, he had sent all of us a message asking for prayers as he prepared to run a marathon the next weekend.

Now I've never run a marathon; actually I've never even considered it. Running twenty-six plus miles is beyond my ability to comprehend, and frankly, I don't think my body could take it. My friend, who's several years younger than I, is the first to admit that it really has a way of beating up his body, so I think I'd be unable to move for weeks or months!

Some of you may be runners, or maybe you have been runners, so you probably know this without my say it. My investigation into the topic of running revealed that there are apparently two basic types. Runners seem either to specialize in short distances known as sprints, or in longer runs. The longest is known as a marathon, and it's 26.2 miles long.

While the mentality and the experience of the two runs are distinctly different, there are still similarities. Both types of runners gather at the starting line, get pumped up, and both have the finish line as their goal. However, that's probably where the similarity ends.

A sprinter has to get off to a fast start, and as a result, experiences a quick muscle burn. His or her effort is focused on seconds or minutes, and the runner pushes hard for that time. The sprint is a very unforgiving race, so meticulous positioning and a trigger-fast start are essential. The goal is a fast start and a quick finish.

A marathoner is quite different. The start tends to be more relaxed, because the small missteps are more forgiving than in the sprint. The runner has to be mentally prepared for the long distance, and sustained energy is critically important in order to endure to the end. A blogger who was commenting on the nature of long-distance running advised runners not to get overwhelmed by the big picture of all 26 miles, because as he says, “We never have any idea what mile 15 is going to look like and feel like while we're running mile 2.” In fact, he cautioned

that the runner may not even have a clue until actually on the 15<sup>th</sup> mile. “Just focus on running the current mile well,” is his counsel.

Well, as you might guess, we're not here this morning to contemplate the different kinds of running, but rather to consider how they might serve as analogies to our lives and as a consequence, our faith. Are there things we can learn from thinking about life in terms of sprints and/or marathons? That's what I'd like us to explore a bit.

As I read and studied the similarities and differences between marathons and sprints, it occurred to me that our physical lives and our spiritual lives have some of both, but I wonder if life isn't more like a marathon that has times of sprinting. There are certainly times when there seems to be rapid-fire change, growth and evolution, but it seems that more often, it's a slower, steadier process that requires a lot of preparation and work. You may remember that several weeks ago we used an interview with Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Outliers*, and one of the points he made is that to achieve any level of competence, it takes 10,000 hours of practice and hard work. In that regard, we're talking major marathon here, which is life seems for the most part to be.

Someone commented that fostering a livelihood, building and sustaining relationships, and engaging in any long term commitment require the perspective of the distance runner. While there may be selective sprints along the way, the speaker said, “**the whole effort is one that favors pacing, patience, fortitude, resilience, sustainability and the long view.**”

The reality is that a long run, like our lives and our spiritual journeys, and a long run means that we will have obstacles to overcome. Therefore, we have to pace ourselves for the long run, and take the wins and losses in stride, because there will certainly be both along the way. We have to keep things in perspective, because there will not be immediate gratification or instant reward for our efforts. We just have to do the little things each step along the way that lead to completion of life's marathon. What traits do we need to develop and possess in order to complete the marathon of life in an honorable fashion?

One necessity is patience. Sometimes we're prone to get discouraged and disheartened when it seems as though we're running in place, getting nowhere. That's when it's important to remember that every moment of life and every experience of life are what we

build on for the next steps. There is no wasted time or activity, unless we choose to think of it that way. Working toward a goal takes time, and we have to allow time to acquire the know-how we need to move forward.

It's been interesting to hear our daughter comment about some of her team members, most of whom are 5-7 years younger than she is. They seem to be impatient, wanting the promotion now, wanting more money now, wanting immediate gratification, and they get frustrated when it doesn't come their way as they think it should. It's not that they aren't talented, because they are, but they simply do not yet know what they don't know.

I don't know if that makes sense to you, or not, but there is some level of life experience that gives us a certain perspective and wisdom that we can't get any other way. The Czech runner, Emile Zatopek, said it this way: "If you want to win something, run 100 meters. If you want to experience something, run a marathon." It pays to be patient, and not just be a flash in the pan that quickly burns out. Patience allows us to see each experience as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Another given in this marathon of life is that endurance and hard work will be part of it. Just as marathoners have to endure pain and fatigue during the long run, we have to endure challenges and obstacles in our life's marathon. One of you sent me a quote by Alfred D. Souza that says it well: "For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin—real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that there obstacles were my life."

Because of all the obstacles and challenges, there will be times when we feel like quitting, like giving up, times when we wonder if it's worth all this struggle and heartache. That's when we need to draw on a deeper, inner strength. Paul tells us how to keep at it in today's Bible snippet. He said, "Let us run with determination the race the lies before us." In fact, I wonder if a Gatorade ad was paraphrasing Paul. You know, the one that says: "There is a moment in every race. A moment where you can either quit, fold, or say to yourself, 'I can do this.'"

Even when we muster every ounce of strength we possess, it may still seem as though we can't break through the barrier before us.

When it seems as though we can't take another step or go another inch, that's when we need to seek the strength of one who is stronger than we are. That's when we can turn to God, and ask for guidance and courage to face the challenges that are in our path. I've always found the words of the prophet Isaiah comforting and reassuring when I am in a discouraged place. He wrote:

"Those who trust in God for help  
Will find their strength renewed.  
They will rise on wings like

eagles;

They will run and not get weary;  
They will walk and not grow

weak.

Being aware of God's strengthening presence reminds me of an old story Len Sweet tells in his book, *Soul Salsa*. He talks about a Native American practice for training young braves. On the night of the boy's thirteenth birthday, after learning hunting, scouting and fishing skills, the young man was placed in a dense forest to spend the night alone. Until then he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe, but on that night, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods, by himself, all night long.

Every time a twig snapped, he envisioned a wild animal ready to pounce on him. Whenever an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he wondered how it could sound more sinister. It was a terrifying night.

After what seemed like an eternity, dawn finally broke and the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. As the boy started looking around, he saw the dim outline of the path, and then, to his utter astonishment, he saw the figure of a man standing a just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was his father, who had been there all night long.

That's how it is when we trust in God. Even though God may seem invisible, perhaps even non-existent, I believe God is always present with us, to give us strength, hope, courage, wisdom, whatever we need to make it through the dark nights of our lives.

Closing:

The co-founder of the New York City marathon, probably without even being aware of it, described what life is like, even while describing a marathon. He said, "The marathon is a charismatic event. It has everything. It has

drama. It has competition. It has heroism.” So it is with the marathon we call life, and no matter which arena we are in, we’re not alone. God is always with us. I’m sure of it.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace.  
Amen.