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**Series:** Winning a Race

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## **RUNNING A RACE**

An unusual and interesting story happened during the 1968 summer Olympics in Mexico City. Long after the marathon was finished and most of the crowd had left, a lone runner from Tanzania named John Stephen Akhwari hobbled into the nearly empty stadium. He was bloody and limping. Police motorcycles with flashing lights followed him as he continued limping around the track to the finish line. The small crowd there saw him, stood up and cheered loudly as he finished the last few meters of his race. When he crossed the finish line, he collapsed into the arms of the waiting medical personnel, who immediately whisked him away to the hospital. What is the big deal about this? The deal is that he didn't quit even though he took a bad fall early in the race, whacked his head, dislocated his knee, and was trampled on before he could get up on his feet. This man got up and finished the race, even though there was no hope for him to win any place.

The next day when he faced the sports reporters, he was asked why he didn't quit after he sustained some injuries and there was no chance he could possibly win any place in the race. He replied that his country didn't send him 5000 miles to start the race. They sent him to finish the race!

Like the Tanzanian marathoner, we Christians entered the race not just to begin it but also to finish it! So it is very important that we stay in race to the end. The Christian life is not a quick sprint but a long-distance marathon! The Christian race begins at the new birth (baptism), and ends when we leave this world.

To successfully finish, we must *"throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us"* (Hebrews 12:1).

So in this sermon series, we will learn how to run on the course that Jesus has set before us, and Paul will show us how to prepare ourselves by getting rid of sins that weigh us down and to run with steadfastness on this course and win the prize!

Let's watch the ASL Bible Translation video clip of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

*“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”*

First Corinthians 9:24 says, *“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.”*

What race was Paul talking about? The Corinthian Christians understood that he was referring to races in the ancient Olympic and Isthmian games that had been popular throughout the Greek world for centuries. The most important events in these games had always been foot races. The marathon originated in Greece. These ancient races were not like the modern Olympics. In these races, only one runner received a prize. For this reason, all the runners would have to put in as much effort as they could to beat the others and win the one prize. This is what Paul meant when he said, *“Run in such a way as to get the prize.”* In other words, run to win!

Here in this verse, Paul used races as an illustration to drive home a point that all those entering the Christian race should always strive to cross the finish line. He repeated the thought in Philippians 3:14, which says, *“I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”*

When Paul said that a Christian life is like a race, he didn't mean that we Christians are to compete against each other for one prize. I am thankful that there is a reward for every Christian who completes the race. If any of you think that once you become a Christian, you made it, think again! You cannot rest a laurel on your head yet!

When you become a follower of Jesus, you just begin the race and look ahead for the prize at the end of the race. Yeah, I know that you live in the fast lane, eat at McDonald's, and are used to fast service from any store, or expect instant gratification in everything, but you cannot become a McChristian! Spiritual maturity does not come instantly! That is not how it works! Being a Christian is a lifelong ongoing process to become like Christ. Paul made it very clear in his message to the Philippians that we are to press on in Christ. The journey to heaven, which, by the way, is our ultimate goal, is filled with hurdles that we must overcome with determination and single-mindedness. Yes, it is not a picnic walk. It is not something where you can easily waltz into heaven. Sorry to disappoint you! However, it is worth pursuing the goal, and it will do you a lot of good. The more you work at it, the closer it will get you to heaven. What should you expect when you become a member of God's family? Spiritual transformation is what you can expect. Many people mistakenly believe that tithing, attending church every Sunday or participating in a Bible study is good enough and does the job for them. But it takes more than that. For spiritual transformation, I encourage you to do the following:

- Make a commitment to Jesus.
- Fix your eyes on Jesus Christ and work on becoming more like Christ.
- Change your attitudes, your perspectives, your priorities, and your worldview. That means you turn your life around 180 degrees.
- Practice what you are taught at church. Being a good Christian on Sunday and then forgetting it for rest of the week will not do it. Proverbs 10:17 says, "He is on the path of life who heeds instruction, but he who forsakes reproof goes astray."
- Live a Christian life daily to the end.
- Get rid of any obstacle that hinders you from realizing your goal.
- Refine your strategy continuously that will help you reach the goal.

I would like to stress the importance of going the distance in Christian life by citing the following verses:

*First Timothy 4:7-10 tells us, "Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe."*

*Second Timothy 2:5 says, "Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules."*

*Second Timothy 4:6-8 also says, "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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."*

Need I say more? No, these verses say it all. So, please remember that it is not enough to know where the finish line is; you must be prepared to break through the "walls" you encounter on your way to the finish line. No matter what happens in your marathon, which is your Christian life's journey, remember God's love and His promise of reward. That will keep you going and give you strength to endure. This will keep you linked to Jesus all the way to the finish line.

I would like to invite you to join in the race if you have not started it yet. Only Athenian free males could participate in the Isthmian games, but any believer, whether a man or a woman, whether rich or poor, anyone who obeys Jesus' command can enter the Christian race. Examine your own life and ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I truly serving Christ?
- Am I using my skills and gifts in a manner worthy of Christ?
- Am I devoting my time, energy and talents for the cause of Christ?

If you feel that you don't, come to the starting line now. Ready...set...GO and claim the prize!



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