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1



LONG-DISTANCE CHRISTIANITY

“EIGHTY YEARS HAVE I SERVED HIM.”
—POLYCARP, BISHOP OF SMYRNA, AD 155

RECENTLY WHILE SITTING on an airplane, someone asked me what metaphors I use to describe my life. It's not every day you get that question. But it is a lot more interesting question than being asked, “How's the weather?” “What do you do?” or, “How about them Broncos?”

CHOOSE YOUR METAPHOR

People use different metaphors to describe their lives. Remember *Forrest Gump*? “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get.”

For others, life is a song—a creative expression. From birth to death, you are working on your own signature composition. Remember *Mr. Holland's Opus*?

For still others, life is a game, or life is a dream, or a battle, or

a roller coaster. I have a friend who truly believes life is a party; the point of being alive is to just have fun.

To be honest, no one metaphor captures our entire lives. But for both of us, the journey metaphor describes our lives more than any other. Life is a long journey.

Both of us have been captured by that great Christian classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, which also highlights this theme. John Bunyan wrote the book while in prison in the late 1600s. The original title was really long but highlights the basic idea: *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which is to Come: Delivered under the similitude of a dream wherein is discovered the manner of his setting out, his dangerous journey; and safe arrival at the desired country.*

Granted, you'll never see a title that long today. Bunyan presents the Christian life as a journey with a start and a finish. It takes us from the city of man (the City of Destruction) to the city of God (the celestial or heavenly city). In that journey, progress is important. You are never safe until you are home. Detours abound. And finishing well is vital.

One reason this metaphor appeals to us is because the Bible repeatedly uses journey language.

JOURNEY LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE

Think of Adam and Eve leaving Eden. Or Abraham leaving Ur. Think of Israel leaving Egypt on their way to the Promised Land. Think of the Jewish people's journey into exile and the return under Ezra.

In the New Testament, several writers speak of the Christian

life as a special kind of journey—a race. In Philippians 3:13–14, Paul writes, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” In 2 Timothy 4:7, writing of the end of his life, he says, “I have finished the race.”

The writer of Hebrews says, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1). He is thinking of a certain kind of race—not a sprint but a distance event.

The Christian life is not a hundred-yard dash . . . but more like a marathon!

Recently one member of our family ran in the Chicago Marathon. A marathon is a long race—26.2 miles. You have to be in real good shape to enter. Participants have six and a half hours in which to finish the course. The winning time in that race was 2:06:24.

I heard someone say the first part of a marathon is like a party. There are all these runners—in Chicago there were forty-five thousand. Crowds lined the streets. The runners started in Grant Park by Lake Michigan. They ran through ethnic neighborhoods from the North Side to the South Side. But after about ten miles, the party was definitely over. That’s when runners begin to look pale. At mile thirteen you “hit the wall.” Some exhausted runners start collapsing. You can see them lying on cots on the side of the road. A marathon is a serious, long-distance run.

Being a disciple of Jesus is like that. We’re called not to a quick sprint but to a long, arduous journey!

During the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, runner John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania competed with seventy-four other world-class runners. Akhwari did not win the race. Actually, he

came in last! But he is remembered for *how* he ran the race.

Halfway through the marathon, Akhwari fell and badly injured his leg, dislocating a joint. After a few minutes on the ground, John Akhwari did what most runners would never do.

He picked himself up off the ground, strapped up his leg, and continued to run.

About an hour after the winner had crossed the finish line, and with only a few thousand spectators left in the stadium, word got out about what had happened to Akhwari. He was still running. When he finally entered the stadium, his leg was bloody and bandaged. Every step caused him to wince. But the remaining crowd began to clap. He turned the curve, and the crowd grew louder. As he approached the finish line and hobbled across, they cheered wildly as if he had won the race. They were stunned by his endurance.

Afterward, when the press asked him why he ran through the pain, despite the fact he could not win, Akhwari looked perplexed. "I don't think you understand," he said. "My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start the race. They sent me seven thousand miles to *finish the race*."¹

This is a great image of endurance for us to keep in mind as we consider long-distance Christianity. The Christian life is, as Eugene Peterson described it in his book on the Psalms, "a long obedience in the same direction." It's a marathon. It requires commitment and discipline to the very end.

Scripture often speaks of the importance of "continuing." In my old King James Bible, it says of the early disciples that in the upper room, they "all continued with one accord in prayer" (Acts 1:14 NKJV). It also says "they continued steadfastly in the apostles'

doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2:42 NKJV). This language runs through the New Testament. They continued in faith and in love.

In Philippians 1:25, Paul says, “I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith.” Colossians 2:6 says, “As you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.”

LIVING IN A CULTURE OF QUITTING

Recently I’ve heard a news commentator say that we live in a culture of quitting. This individual was complaining about the high turnover of computer technicians in the workplace. People tend not to stick around one place too long. One of my children started a job after high school. After several weeks, he wanted to quit because it was hard. I would not allow it!

Think of all the people who start—but soon quit—diets and fitness routines. Think of the many who start attending church, only to leave after a short while. Worse yet, think of all those who start a marriage but then leave when things become difficult.

Colleges constantly deal with retention issues. Many students who start, drop out.

High school graduation rates in America are also trending downward. Rates peaked in 1969, at 77 percent, but are now at 68 percent. This means 32 percent of high school students do not finish. A recent report said that seventeen of the nation’s fifty largest cities had high school graduation rates lower than 50 percent!²

It is easy to quit when things get difficult. The Christian’s journey is filled with many hard things. Trials will come. Doubts will arise. Disappointments come unexpectedly. People you trust will let you down. Church conflict may disillusion you. You will fail

more than you ever thought possible. You will most likely be insulted for your faith. Perhaps you will be persecuted. No doubt you will grow weary from this long journey.

In Hebrews 12, after exhorting us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” the writer tells us to look to Jesus, “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Verse 3 says, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Like an athlete running a long-distance race, whose legs want to stop, whose lungs are not getting enough oxygen, and who is growing weary and ready to bonk, the journeying Christian will grow weary of doing good (Galatians 6) and will want to give up. We will have good days, but we will also have plenty of bad days. We will be tempted to want to take shortcuts or drop out of the race altogether.

At that very moment we have two encouragements to keep us going. There is the “great cloud of witnesses,” whose example, like the stadium spectators of old, cheer us on to stay in the race. But more importantly, we have the Lord Himself going ahead of us, “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). His encouragement is there so we will not grow weary and lose heart.

He not only gives us the grace and grit to carry on when we feel like quitting, but He also holds out for us the ultimate future and eternal joy we will share with Him at the end of our race. This is what enables His saints to persevere in the Christian marathon. This is what enables us to keep going.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

One of the great examples of enduring faithfulness in the early church was a man named Polycarp of Smyrna. A prominent city pastor of a church in Asia Minor (now Turkey), he was martyred in AD 155.

Polycarp was born about AD 69, around the time of Paul's martyrdom in Rome. His church may actually have been established by Paul. Polycarp was even discipled by the apostle John! Early church leader Irenaeus says that Polycarp had talked to many who had seen Christ.

We have a detailed account of Polycarp's death in the writings of Eusebius, the early church historian. He was executed under the reign of the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius during a wave of persecution.

When Christians were being fed to wild beasts in the arena, a crowd began to chant, "Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!" (Pagans sometimes called Christians atheists because Christians refused to believe in the gods.)

At this time, Polycarp was an old man. When the authorities searched for and found the elderly pastor, they arrested him and brought him to the arena. First they tried to persuade him to curse Christ and confess Caesar as Lord in order to save himself.

At the judgment seat, the governor said, "Curse Christ and I will release you. Have respect for your old age. Say, 'Away with the atheists!'"

The old bishop replied, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"³

That's long-distance Christianity!

They threatened Polycarp with wild beasts, but he would not be dissuaded. The proconsul then threatened to burn him alive.

Polycarp replied, "You threaten fire that burns for an hour and is over. But the judgment on the ungodly is forever."

The fire was then prepared. Polycarp lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed: "Father, I bless You that You deemed me worthy of this day and hour, that I might take a portion of the martyrs in the cup of Christ. . . Among these may I today be welcome before Thy face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice."

The flames then engulfed him, and he was burned alive!

Not all those who confessed Christ as Savior in the early church were that steadfast. Some gave in to the pressure to preserve their lives. Some burned incense to Caesar, cursed Christ, and fell away. Rather than finish the race, they quit when it got hard. That's always the way it has been.

BILLY AND CHUCK

Back in 1944, as a student at Moody Bible Institute, I (George) remember listening to some influential preachers who were involved with a new organization called Youth for Christ. Two of them stood out—young Billy Graham and young Chuck Templeton. Of the two, it seemed that Templeton was the more gifted. Some called him the most brilliant, dynamic young preacher in America. He and Billy were close friends. I heard Chuck preach at Moody Church. He not only preached, but he also drew an illustrative chalk drawing as he preached, as I later did.

Templeton pastored a church in Toronto. He then went to

Princeton and became an evangelist of the Presbyterian Church USA. After Princeton, Templeton broadened his message. By 1950 he had left the ministry to pursue a radio and television career. Eventually he said he no longer believed that Jesus was the Son of God, and he became an atheist. Chuck Templeton did not continue.

Billy, of course, followed a different path. It's not that he didn't face temptation and doubt. Read his biography. It is clear that he did. But he continued in the faith. Well into his 90s, he still proclaims Christ and His gospel.

Maybe you know people like Templeton—people who at one point appeared to be on fire for God but have since dropped out. And maybe you know others who are still persevering, living out a long-distance faith.

What causes one person to stay on course, and another to fall away? I know that Billy Graham and others like him would answer that their endurance is ultimately by God's grace.

HOW DO WE REMAIN STEADFAST? A PRELIMINARY RESPONSE

But humanly speaking, what explains the difference? And how do we remain steadfast and stick with the race? This whole book seeks to answer these questions. But here is an initial response.

First, those who practice long-distance Christianity have a marathon mind-set. They consider the long view and know that this is a lifelong journey with many seasons. In this race they understand that God is faithful. But like an athlete, they also understand the importance of constancy of purpose. So they run with the end in view. They keep their eyes fixed on the finish line and

the prize. They know they must “lay aside every weight,” including the sins that slow us down, so that they can make it to the end (Hebrews 12:1 *ESV*). Perhaps that’s why the New Testament repeatedly uses athletic illustrations to describe the life of the Christian. Something like athletic discipline is necessary to reach the finish line of faith.

Second, we remain steadfast by taking advantage of all the encouragements and means of persevering grace that God gives His people to stay on track. We have God’s Word, the Bible, to help us renew our minds and cleanse our hearts. We have the gift of the church. The worship and fellowship of the church are absolutely necessary for us to stay faithful.

Solo Christianity does not work. The fire of our own faith is enhanced as we stay near the fire of other people’s faith. Isolate an ember and it quickly dies out. Gather them together and the fire stays hot. In the fellowship of the local church, we have regular corporate worship and fellowship to restore our spiritual bearings. The preached Word is one of the main ways God speaks to us. Communion and baptism are gospel signs to remind us who we are in Christ and the strength of His love for us. They are occasions to renew our covenant commitment to the Lord.

Third, we have the help of the Lord Himself, by the Holy Spirit, who said He would never leave us or forsake us. He promises to be with us to the end of our lives. As we trust Him, He gives us strength to continue. As we grow more deeply in His gospel, He confirms and affirms our faith.

Neither of us authors knows how many years we have left. We are both in the second half of life. We may be near the end of life, or quite far from the end. George has had cancer twice—once as

a teen, and once in his 60s. He never expected to live this long. So he has been thinking about this topic for a long time. Don also has had some close calls. Statistically, someone in their 80s has a shorter time left than someone in their fifties. Statistically, fifty-year-olds have twenty-five or more years left. But neither of us has a clue how many days God has ordained for us.

We share a sense that today is a day of grace—that each day is a gift, and that we want to make each one count until we reach that finish line.

A number of years ago, I (Don) observed a baptism service in England at an Anglican church. New believers were being baptized. After baptizing each individual, the minister signed each person with the sign of the cross and said, “I sign you with the cross, the sign of Christ. Do not be ashamed to confess your faith in Christ crucified. Fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world, and the Devil, *and continue* as His faithful soldier and servant to the end of your life.”

Continue! Continue! We leave that charge with you as you think about a long-distance faith.