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# Train Through Pain Yet With Joy for the Race of Faith

A sermon on 2 Timothy 2:3 by Coty Pinckney preached at Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte NC, August 3, 2008

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Have you ever stepped out in faith? Have you ever made a hard decision, decided, "Yes I will follow God!"? What happened next?

We love stories like that which continue: "And it didn't seem possible, but by God's grace I was able to do it!"

Praise God for such stories. Praise God for that way of displaying His faithfulness.

But do you also love stories that proceed differently? What if the rest of the story is: "I fell flat on my face." Or "there was a great deal of pain and suffering, and no success that I could discern."

Think of the Apostle Paul in that regard.

Paul wrote his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy from prison. He was cold. Several former co-laborers were now ashamed of him; they did not want to have their names associated with him. So they deserted him. At his preliminary trial, no one came to his defense. He knew his legal case was hopeless; his execution would come soon.

His is not a story that, on the face of it, inspires confidence. Indeed, Paul even reminds Timothy of his persecutions and sufferings.

But he doesn't say, "I've made mistakes in being too public, in irritating religious and government officials, in inviting persecution. Be careful to avoid persecution so you can have a fruitful ministry."

Quite the contrary. He says, "all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). And he tells him:

Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God (1:8).

Furthermore, he tells him, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3).

Paul tells Timothy to expect pain and, in a sense, to embrace suffering.

What should we expect in our own lives?

Surely we should expect that pain and suffering are a normal part of some Christians' lives. That much is clear. But Christians over the years have made at least two big mistakes when thinking about pain.

- Some have said: "Pain is a necessary step to becoming like Christ. So I should pursue pain! I should seek pain." With this in mind, over the centuries, some have whipped themselves, or sat on poles, or gone to other extremes. That is NOT the biblical message.
- Much more prominent in our country today is the second mistake: That is, saying, "Of course, Paul suffered, Jesus suffered, and Timothy was going to have to suffer. The political powers of their day opposed them. But today, we don't face such persecution by our government, and God wants us to be free from pain. He wants us to prosper. Just believe! Have faith! And He will give you good success."

This morning, I want to approach this subject of pain via the analogy between running and living the Christian life. For pain plays an important role in running. Someone who says, "My life

should be free from pain; I should avoid anything that will cause me pain," will never succeed as a runner. However, that's also true of the one who seeks pain. He, too, will fail as a runner.

This is our second sermon in a brief series on "Running the Race of Faith." Last week, I asked: Are you a runner? We highlighted the importance of knowing your identity, who are you at the core. This is a necessary step to knowing your GOAL, what you aim at. Then we looked at three aspects of discipline to achieve the goal, to become what you are:

- Discipline in the type of training
- Discipline in your consistency of training
- Discipline in all areas of life

Today we continue these thoughts about discipline in training before looking at racing over the following three weeks. We'll consider this topic under three headings:

- Maintain discipline in training despite the pain
- Discipline yourself NOT to run
- Rejoice while you train

## Maintain Discipline in Training Despite the Pain

As we noted, Paul tells Timothy: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

All of you who have run regularly know there is some degree of pain involved. Certainly all of you who have run on a track or cross country team know a great deal of pain is involved.

Interval training is one important part of preparation for distance runners. When running intervals, athletes run for a particular distance -- say one lap, 1/4 of a mile then rest for about 90 seconds, then run again. This allows the body to run a cumulative distance of, say, two miles much faster than would be possible by running with no rest. But about halfway through a workout like this, if you are running hard, lactic acid begins to build up in your muscles, legs begin to get stiff, and maintaining pace becomes difficult -- and, at times, painful. This is the whole point of the workout -- teaching your body to run well in race conditions, when your muscles begin to get stiff and tired. Completing the workout is key to reaping its benefits.

Interval work at sea level is tough, but it is even tougher at altitude, where each gasp of air provides less oxygen. When I was teaching high school in Kenya in 1977, I coached track and cross country. Our school was at an elevation of 5000'. I well remember a workout one hot afternoon, when I had scheduled seven intervals of 330 yards for my athletes. After they finished the sixth, I could tell they were tiring, so I encouraged them: "Good job! You're doing great! Just one more, and we'll be done for the day!" My best runner Joseph replied, addressing me by the Swahili word for teacher: "No, Mwalimu, we are too tired, we can run no more." I responded, "Yes, Joseph, you are tired -- it's almost the end of the workout, you're supposed to be tired. Running when you're tired makes you stronger!" "No, no, Mwalimu," Joseph replied, "running when we're tired doesn't make us stronger. Running when we're tired only makes us more tired."

We often feel that way in the Christian life. "I'm tired, Lord. How can I keep going? There's no benefit to my continuing. There's no point in going on." It doesn't seem like this pain can produce anything worthwhile.

But Paul tells Timothy in his first letter:

**Train yourself for godliness; 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. 9 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. 10 For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:7-10)**

Becoming godly, becoming a person whose focus is on Christ, requires training. It does not happen automatically when we place our faith in Jesus. It requires TOIL. It requires striving (another athletic word for competing in event).

But Paul does not only emphasize the pain. He also says, It's worth it! Unlike athletic training, which is valuable in this life but not in the new heavens and the new earth, training in godliness is of value FOR ETERNITY. So it's worth a lot of temporal pain, because Jesus is our hope, both now and for all eternity.

The pain of interval training is worth it – in part because it is a necessary step towards achieving our goal of winning the race.

The pain of growing in godliness is worth it – in part because that pain is a necessary step towards achieving our goal of glorifying Him for all eternity.

Let me note two other New Testament passages that make similar points:

**Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)**

**Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:2-5)**

Do you see the same general idea in these passages? When we go through the pain of trials, of suffering, we can rejoice – Why? The reason given in both passages is that the pain, the suffering produces results. Such trials produce steadfastness and endurance. This proves our character – this shows that we really belong to Jesus, that we really value Him above all temporal pleasures. This, in turn, solidifies our hope in God – and this hope is indeed certain.

So in pain, in suffering, we can have confidence that God is at work –

- That we will grow in grace, as we lean on Him and cry out to Him
- That He will make us more like Him through this suffering
- That He, indeed, will glorify Himself through our suffering.

The runner's pain in interval training enables him to become a faster runner. Our pain in the Christian life leads to our spiritual growth

So maintain discipline in training despite the pain.

### **Discipline Yourself NOT to Run**

A good coach knows that sometimes he has to stop his athletes from running. He has to make them slow down, or take some time off.

Some athletes discipline themselves to run through pain so often that they quit listening to their bodies. In a strange parallel with those who try to become Christlike by inflicting pain on themselves, these runners train too hard, putting themselves

through pain foolishly – and they end up getting slower, not faster.

A good runner MUST distinguish between different types of pain:

- 1) The normal pain of sore muscles, of tiredness. Every runner must discipline himself to work through such pain.
- 2) The pain of a muscle about to tear, of a tendon that's inflamed, or of a knee that's injured. That sort of pain needs attention – and that attention includes rest.

At this year's Olympic Trials, Tyson Gay, the winner of the 100m and a gold medal favorite in the Beijing 200m, experienced a hamstring cramp halfway into the 200m quarterfinal. He stopped. He had to stop. He actually fell. He got ice on it immediately, had it massaged, and did some mild stretching. He then eased back into running over the course of a few days. Apparently, he is fine now. Of course, he did not qualify in his best event, but he will still run the 100m and the sprint relay.

Imagine what would have happened if the day after his injury, Tyson Gay had said, "I've got to discipline myself to run through pain! I've got to go down to the track and run some hard 200's, to get myself ready!"

What would have happened? He probably would have torn his hamstring. He would not have been able to compete in any event at the Games.

The day after his injury, the best way to train his body to achieve his goal was to rest.

Do you see the distinction? An athlete does not SEEK PAIN for the sake of pain. The pain he experiences serves a purpose. If continuing to run will decrease the likelihood of his achieving his goal, he stops running. He stops the pain.

The point in training is not: "Make yourself hurt!" The point is: "Run smart. Train smart. Hurt when necessary. But focus on preparing yourself for the race."

In the Christian life: This is the error of those who seek pain, who think there is something spiritual in suffering. But Paul did not tell Timothy, "Go suffer! Any way you can think of, suffer!" He told him, "share in suffering **for the gospel!**" That is: "If faithfully living out and proclaiming the Gospel leads to suffering, accept it joyfully! Know that God will use that, in your life and in the lives of others."

But your lying on a bed of nails is not necessary to proclaim the gospel. Instead, it's foolishness. It's ultimately self-exalting and pride-increasing through a false humility, as Paul says in Colossians 2:23:

**These [rules] have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.**

So discipline involves enduring pain. Discipline also involves avoiding some pain. The key distinction is: Does the pain advance my goal? Once again, this highlights the importance of knowing who you are, and thereby knowing your goal. (We'll discuss this topic in more detail in the sermon two weeks from today.)

### **Rejoice While You Train**

We've already highlighted the biblical commands from James 1 and Romans 5 to rejoice in suffering. Those passages emphasize that we are to rejoice because of the way we will grow through suffering. Pain and suffering lead to endurance, to steadfastness, to proven character, to hope. Pain thus helps us achieve our goal. The same is true in running: The pain of interval training is a means to getting faster.

Interval training was my least favorite type of workout in high school and college. Actually, that's not a strong enough statement. I hated interval training. I knew it was necessary. I would work hard at it. But I saw it as a necessary evil. So for first twelve or thirteen years after college, when I was coaching myself, I ran many hard workouts, but very few intervals. I tried to convince myself that focusing on races from 10 miles to the marathon, I didn't need to do intervals on the track.

When I was about 35, however, I started training with the Williams College track team, coached by Pete Farwell. Pete is an excellent coach, and I learned a tremendous amount from him. By this point, I was competing rarely, and only in low key meets. I knew I would never again run as fast as I had in the past. But I started running intervals quite a bit – without any race in mind. Just running.

And my whole attitude towards interval training changed. I wrote the following at age 37:

I run intervals now because I love it. I love to feel my body grow tired, I love to focus on maintaining speed and effort despite tightness and pain, I love to work through all that, to be mentally tough, to complete a hard workout. There's no real goal now -- just enjoyment of the work. The process has become the goal.

If that had been true for me at age 20, I would have been a faster runner. More than that: I would have lived out much more fully what it means to be a runner. Only someone who knows he is a runner can make that statement.

Do you see the difference in the two ways of thinking about interval training? The first considers it a necessary evil, a means to achieving the goal. In the second, you enjoy the interval training itself; you take joy in the process, knowing that this is part of the fulfillment of who you are.

There's a scene in the best running movie ever made, *Chariots of Fire*, that brings out this truth. The time is 1923 or 1924. The Scottish sprinter Eric Liddell grew up in China in a missionary family, and plans to return to China to devote himself to missions. While he is back home studying, he has become one of Scotland's best runners. His sister Jenny fears he that all this running success is causing him to lose his focus, to forget about China. She reminds him that God made him for the purpose of missions. Eric replies:

Jenny, Jenny: I believe God made me for [that] purpose, but He also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.

Ryan Hall, the top American marathoner and a medal contender in Beijing, said something similar in a recent interview (less eloquently, but then his interview wasn't scripted)

I feel this intimate connection with God, and I feel like I'm doing what God has called me to do. I feel that all the time when I'm out running.

For Liddell and for Hall, running is, in part, a fulfillment of God's call on their lives. And they rejoice in God – even in the midst of the pain associated with running.

Spiritually, this is related to Philipians 4:4, which we read and sang: "Rejoice in the Lord always – again I say Rejoice!"

Rejoice in the Lord – ALWAYS. Think of hard times in your life:

- Those days when you wondered if you could go on
- Those times when others let you down.
- Times of physical pain.
- Times of hurt, of loss.

Think of your hardest days. Paul says: In those hard times, rejoice! Rejoice in ALL circumstances – Why? Not only because you know God is using any pain for His good purposes. But rejoice IN THE LORD in all circumstances. He provides for you

RIGHT NOW, in the MIDDLE of the tough times. He is there RIGHT NOW. He is with you in those times

Did you hear the two different facets of this rejoicing in the Lord in all circumstances?

First, picking up on what Liddell and Hall said:

*Enjoy fulfilling the purpose for which you were made*

In the beginning of the book of Jeremiah, God says about the prophet:

**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jeremiah 1:5)**

Jeremiah was created to be a prophet – a prophet whose words would be rejected by his people. He had a hard life. But God made him for a purpose, and he could rejoice as he fulfilled that purpose by God's power for His glory.

We too are made for a purpose. When we face pain and sorrow in fulfilling that purpose – we too can rejoice. What was true of Jeremiah is also true of us: We are made for a purpose. "Before you were born, I consecrated you"

Second: *Enjoy the One who made you for that purpose*

Our rejoicing in all circumstances is NOT only because we know God will use them, not only because we know God is fulfilling His purpose for us even in pain – but our rejoicing is also a direct joy in WHO HE IS – a delight in God Himself.

Habakkuk says this beautifully, after God tells him of the coming, horrible destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of his country as he knows it:

**Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.**

Do you see that? His joy is not mainly in what God is accomplishing, nor in his role in bringing about God's plan. But Habakkuk's joy is in God himself.

A fine New Testament example of this is in Acts 16. Paul and Silas are in Philippi. Paul casts a demon out of young slave girl who had been making money for her owners. They get upset, and drag Paul and Silas before local magistrates, accusing them of advocating unlawful customs. The magistrates don't even give Paul and Silas a chance to speak. They have their clothes ripped off their backs, have them beaten, and then place them in stocks in the jail.

How do Paul and Silas react?

What's happened to them is unjust. It is illegal. The accusations are untrue. And all this happened because they freed a young girl from torment by demons and from misuse by her owners.

Surely they were tempted to say, "Why me, God! I'm just trying to follow you! I'm just trying to do what's right!"

But they don't give in to that temptation. What do they do?

**About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. (Acts 16:25)**

That is – they rejoice in the Lord always. They rejoice in Who God is. They delight in Him. Even in pain. Even in prison. They see Him in the midst of pain – and they feel His pleasure.

## Conclusion

God does not promise us a successful life.

He does not promise us a pain free existence.

He does not promise us that we will understand the reason for every sorrow we experience.

Nor does he promise that if we will hurt ourselves enough, we will be like him.

His promise instead is this:

“I made you! I made you for a purpose: To enjoy me forever. And yet you rejected that wonderful purpose. You turned your back on me. You spurned me. And you sought satisfaction and joy and influence and meaning elsewhere.

“You thus deserve to be rejected by Me. You deserve my wrath and judgment.

“But I sent my Son, the second person of the Trinity, to become man, to live a life which fulfills my purpose for humanity. He enjoyed me, he delighted in me, He loved me with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength, every minute of every day. And then He suffered on the cross, taking the penalty for the wrath you deserved on Himself.

“If you will believe in Him, if you will turn from these sources of satisfaction that never satisfy, and trust Him alone, then you will be mine. United with my SON, you will be loved with an everlasting love.

“And I will guide you through this world of suffering and pain. Every step of the way you shall have me by your side. I will watch over you and teach you and mature you and fulfill you and use you.

“And in the end – I will bring you to myself. I will give you a new body – a body that will never experience suffering or pain – a body that can run and not grow weary.

“And you will delight in me more and more for all eternity, as you learn more and more of My infinite and inexhaustible greatness and glory.”

That's His promise.

Do you believe it?

Will you follow Him –

- Through pain and joy?
- Through sorrow and happiness?

Will you run the race of faith?

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The Ryan Hall quote comes about 5:25 into the interview found at this link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eM\\_oa5Yc8gq](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eM_oa5Yc8gq)

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