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Running – Hebrews 11:1, 3, 8, 11, 32-34; 12:1-2, 12-15, 28

Running. How many of you are runners out there? You can run from something or someone; you can run to something or someone. You can just run! Run for the joy of it, run for the good things it can do for you, run even if you hate it.

Forty years ago, Jim Fixx really got the running – or jogging – craze off the ground with a book entitled *The Complete Book of Running*. I was one of millions who bought the book and started the deterioration of my knees.

At the time Fixx wrote his book, the Boston Marathon was the race of races. Even though it was first run in 1897, it took nearly eighty years to make it the huge event it is today. In the 1970's, the crowds watching it were still pretty sparse; running was still seen as sort of odd by many people. Most people didn't even know it was twenty-six point two miles, only that it was a really, really long race.

But Jim Fixx fixed all that. He made a household name of Bill Rogers, who won the Boston Marathon four times and was once the American record-holder in the event. It's hard to imagine running over

twenty-six miles in less than two hours and fifteen minutes – in my prime, the most I could manage was a half-marathon, and a slow one at that!

But Bill Rogers was strong and fast, so you can imagine his surprise when, in a story Fixx relates, as he led the field one year, a spectator called out to him at the twenty-mile mark: “You can make it!” Really, unless he injured himself, there was no chance he wouldn’t. You can make it!

Which brings us to this broad section of the letter to the Hebrews. We’ve skipped through most of this passage, but the writer has a very clear point that he reinforces over and over – and it just happens to be the same point that well-meaning spectator made to Bill Rogers, except the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is making it to us: “You can make it.”

“Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.” What you don’t see until very near the end of a marathon is – the finish line.

Many people have observed that life itself is more marathon than sprint – the finish line is out there, and every time we get past one mile marker, well, you look up, and there’s another, farther down the course.

And there are complications. If life is a marathon course, it isn’t too well marked out. Oh, there are the broad outlines, and every now

and then there is a clear sign, but at the times you can find yourself running straight toward a dead end, or the road may be washed out.

That's assuming you're running for the finish line. Sometimes, you may be trying to run away from it! Perhaps not even aware there is one – or trying hard to ignore that it's out there.

So, there are two directions we could be running in – toward, and away from. But there are times when you're in the middle of the course and it may not be clear which way is which. Of course, there are times, too, when you feel like you're running off in all directions at once. That's particularly hard.

Here's where faith comes in.

The writer of this letter knows his audience is completely familiar with all the stories he refers to, even if we're not. We cut most of them off today, because his point is clear: there is a path to follow, it's been traveled by others they've heard of, and the path is faith. By faith, these people kept on going, and by faith we will get where we are going. All of us, and each of us. It's about faith, faith in the promises of God, faith in the power of Christ. Faith that there is a finish line, that we are meant to cross it with joy and a sense of accomplishment and into the arms of Christ.

We lose our way when we let ourselves be distracted by the things that try to camouflage Christ or distract us from God. There can be

times when we think we're being faithful and obedient and still be running flat out away from the finish line. And there are times when we are running fast and true, but the path is not very clear, and we don't know that we're right where we're supposed to be.

A couple of years ago, there was a commercial for a clothing company, and I saw it only once. It opened with a man running. Not just any runner: he was running flat out, with complete abandon and every ounce of strength he had, sprinting for all he was worth across a field.

Then, the camera pulled back, and suddenly it was clear that the field wasn't a field at all, it was some sort of turf on the top of a building. And as the camera pulled farther back, you could see that it wasn't just any building, it was a skyscraper, and not only was there no railing at the edge of the roof, that runner was not slowing down.

He ran right off the edge of the building, right into the air, legs still pumping.

Suddenly, the scene shifted: a young man and a woman were sitting in a café at a table for two, the man was leaning in to kiss the woman for the first time, and I realized what the first scene was about. It was all about believing that you were doing the right thing at the right time: that the runner wouldn't fall, that the girl wouldn't turn away or slap him; he knew that's what he had to do, what he must do. There was

faith, the reality of what we hope for, relying on the proof that couldn't be seen, could become reality until it was relied upon.

The commercial didn't show what happened next. We don't know, in the sense we haven't seen or experienced, what happens next for us. All we have is that faith in the promises, the strength, the power of God that we are running the race that is laid out in front of us: the race of faith toward the finish line that is God.

So throw off the baggage. Cut down the weight you carry – worry, uncertainty, anger, frustration, confusion – and run the course.

Now, even though I've said that the course isn't always clear, it does have some very specific rules: "Make sure that no one misses out on God's grace" – do everything in your power to make the good news known, so that others know the course of faith is there, that they aren't running life aimlessly. "Make sure no root of bitterness grows up that might cause trouble and pollute many people" – hold fast to the bedrock principle of "love one another as I have loved you" and treat everyone you meet as if they were Christ himself. Don't foster dissent: find a way to make things work, serving "in a way that is pleasing to God with respect and awe."

I know, there aren't very many runners in this crowd – though I know of at least one collegiate champion sprinter. But we are all

running a race, even if metaphorically: the race of faith, the race of life – run it well.

Run it well. Run it with abandon. Run it knowing that the finish line is before you. Run it together, with the people of faith who surround you. Run. You can do it.