

Running God's Marathon With Christ

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I want to preface the introduction to this sermon with a note of thanks to our Great God for the way He gives us everything we need when we need it, as we all live this adventure of life with Him and each other.

In this specific instance, my reference is to the introduction to the subject of this sermon that had been on my mind for quite some time before the events of the introduction. We can never take credit ourselves for those things the Father and the Son give us to bind us all together with Them; there will never be enough ways to thank Them.

A few weeks ago, we had the privilege to share part of the Sabbath with Bill and Sharon Onisick because they were in Chicago so that Bill could run in the 41st Chicago Marathon the following day. The race is one of the “Big Six” major marathons in the world along with Boston, New York, London, Berlin, and Tokyo. So this is a very big deal that brings the greatest marathon racers from across the planet, including (as Sharon sees it) Bill, to compete for the coveted prizes and stature of winning the Chicago Marathon.

I have never really paid close attention to the race, other than what is reported in the news preceding the event, and afterwards. But this time, because of Bill’s participation, moved me to be more enthusiastic. I watched a good portion of the race that was broadcast live from 7:30 to 11:30 Sunday morning on one of the major network television stations here in Chicago.

It turns out this a very big deal. Not only did it bring the world’s greatest marathon runners to Chicago, but they also have the finest analysts of the sport giving riveting commentary and analysis of the race.

I must admit, having tried to run distance myself (and very poorly, I might add), I could not imagine why anybody would want to watch something that was so boring to do! I only did it to try to stay physically fit, even though my

mind kept telling me, “This is such a woefully painful waste of time and energy!”

However, contrary to what I expected, the race turned into a highly enjoyable and inspiring event, as the commentators laid out the nuances of the marathon and the runners. There were three things I found especially memorable. The first was a simple but graphic description one of the commentators gave of how a runner views the overall race.

The runner sees the race as a funnel—wide and free-flowing at the beginning, but gradually swirling down, progressively narrowing to an intensely focused rush to the finish; especially narrowed and focused in the last 6 mile push to the finish line.

The second point they made was that the elite runners, more often than not work with each other throughout the race, pacing and drafting one another. Drafting, which is probably a familiar term to all of you NASCAR fans, is the technique where one runner will run closely behind another to reduce wind resistance. This is actually something the elite runners will take turns doing for one another, while knowing that even though it is a competition, the closer they work with one another the more likely they are to finish well, even set records. Although in the end only one marathoner in that race will win the prize.

The last thing I noted was the support from family, friends, and enthusiasts along the route. On this particular Sunday it had been chilly and raining, and even though the rain had stopped shortly before the race began, it started again an hour or so into the race, but the crowds along the route remained large. Some were under umbrellas, some sported rain gear, and some got as wet as the racers, but most all the spectators continued to cheer the runners along the grueling 26 mile course through the streets of Chicago.

I am sure you have already seen some obvious analogies to our own race on the course to the Kingdom of God. But today I want to focus on the suffering and distractions of the distance runner that may pull him off course or quit the race all together. More specifically, I want to focus our attention on

exactly what we can learn from the insufferable temptations that could have pulled our Forerunner off course, but instead strengthened His position to set the pace and become the perfect “drafting” runner for each one of us.

Let us turn to a very important familiar set of scriptures, the truth from God’s Word, which we probably do not appreciate to the extent we should in its literal application.

Hebrews 2:9-11 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 5:5-11 So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: "You are My Son, today I have begotten You." As He also says in another place: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

Now with this in mind, please listen carefully as I read an account I feel is much underappreciated in light of those scriptures we just read. Our great

High Priest now seated at our Father's throne was tried in all points as we are, and can therefore, quickly run to our side during this marathon we face.

So please listen as I read the account of His 40 days in the wilderness, preparing to finish what He had started so long ago, as laid out in the *NIV Harmony of the Gospels* integrating Matthew, Mark and Luke.

While each of the synoptic gospels records the event, they each add details lacking in the others. We will begin with Jesus Christ's baptism starting in Mark 1:9 and then follow the flow back and forth across the gospel accounts. So please just listen because it may be distracting if you are trying to flip back and forth as I read one flowing account across the three Gospels.

At that time when all the people were being baptized Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But, John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then, John consented. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. And as he was praying, coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open, and the Spirit of God descending like a dove, lighting on Him. A voice from heaven said, 'You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.'

Now, Jesus was about 30 years old when He began His ministry. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit returned from the Jordan, and at once the Spirit sent Him out into the desert. He was in the wilderness for 40 days being tempted by Satan. He ate nothing during those days. At the end of them, He was hungry. The tempter came to Him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Then the Devil took Him to the holy city, and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command the angels concerning you, to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands so you will not strike your foot against a stone."'

Jesus answered him, ‘It is also written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ Again the Devil took Him to a high mountain, and showed Him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world, and their splendor, ‘All this will I give You if You will bow down and worship me. I will give You all their authority and splendor for it has been given to me, and I will give it to anyone I want to, so if you worship me, it will all be Yours.’” Jesus said to him, ‘Away from Me, Satan, for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.”’ When the Devil had finished all his tempting, he left Him until an opportune time, and the angels came and attended to Him.”

Brethren, each gospel fills in vital pieces that the others do not, but I want you to note the one thing Mark and Luke make clear: Satan was tempting and testing Him throughout the whole 40 days, even though we only have three specific trials mentioned, and seemingly only at the end. But did all three of these trials come at the end of the 40 days or at different points along the way? And what were the other trials while Jesus Christ spent 40 days fasting in a wilderness inhabited by the spiritual and physical dangers of Satan, his taunting demons, and wild beasts? Only by putting these three gospel accounts together are we able to see a little more clearly into the incredible difficulties Christ faced in these 40 days in the wilderness.

In the concluding paragraph found in *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* that ends a very lengthy piece describing the wilderness, as it is used literally and figuratively in the Old and New Testaments, the authors of that reference text state:

In summary, the wilderness is an ambivalent image in the Bible. If it is a place of deprivation, danger, attack, and punishment, it is also the place where God delivers His people, provides for them, and reveals Himself.

It was there in that place of deprivation, danger, and attack that Jesus Christ (now following His baptism and the explosive reconnection to the Father in the essence of the Holy Spirit) reviewed the details of His previously planned work of His “God with us” ministry, in total accord with the Father’s will.

It was from this point forward that all of miracles and proclamations of the coming Kingdom of God took place, but always with Satan there exerting incredible pressure, trying to attack and destroy the symbiotic relationship of the Son of Man and His Father!

No man has ever done what Jesus Christ did in weathering such a violent storm intended to question and destroy His perfect relationship with His Father and Their plan to create us in their unflawed image. *He did it for us—to warn us—to pace us—to draft us—to perfect us!*

Philippians 2:5-16 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

We cannot take this lightly, brethren! The cost was enormous for both the Word and the Father. It was more than the Word giving up His rights and

privileges as God to become a man and obedient unto death on a stake. It was separation from each other!

The Son of Man grew in wisdom and stature and favor of the Father while under His grace, as we can read there in Luke 2:40-52. Then following baptism to fulfill all righteousness, a direct reciprocal line of communication once again was restored for Jesus Christ to fulfill His responsibilities as "God with us," in bringing us to the Father.

Please turn with me now to a few of the scriptures we read every year at Passover and that tie back to just how intimate our relationship is with our High Priest through the work He did in sacrifice for us so that we can be sure-footed in our own marathon race.

John 14:5-12 Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him." Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father."

Brethren, we do not have time to go through this now but do we understand that Jesus Christ was always under pressure and in danger physically and spiritually so that He could be in all points tempted as we are and rush to our aid, knowing exactly what we are going through?

With this in mind, we will turn our attention back to His wilderness temptation. Why only three events recorded? Did Jesus tell the apostles of

more? I do not know—maybe. But we know that at the end of the book of John, he writes that, “If everything Jesus did was written down, he supposed even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.”

So perhaps, as in the rest of the sublimely concise Word of God, Jesus Christ laid out a general pattern of satanic temptations and our expected responses; giving us an effective way for us to resist the Devil and make the right decisions to stay the course.

Perhaps, if you go back and look at each one of these trials and apply them to the others throughout Christ’s life, or even apply them to our own, we will see a consistent pattern of the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.

We should also see our ability to combat them in light of Christ’s word to the apostles and to us, there in John 14.

John 14:12-15 “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it. If you love Me keep My commandments.”

Consider Satan’s pattern of attack and what God expects us to do because Jesus Christ has run the race, and knows exactly how to help:

1. Satan will always be trying to get us to use the power and gifts we have been given to serve our own physical wants and desires that are not in line with the will of God.
2. Satan will always be trying to force our hands to use the power and gifts we have been given to puff ourselves up. This can even manifest itself in considering ourselves better than those, who do not understand what we do because God has not chosen to gift them yet as He has gifted us.

3. Satan will always try to get us to *neglect* the power and gifts of God by offering his easy way out, not according to the will of God, but in service to him!

All of this comes from an enemy who twists the truth to meet his own ends to destroy the union that has graciously been given through the Holy Spirit under the direction of *the One who knows* exactly what we are going through, and is there to rush to our side.

We do not have time now, but please look for yourselves later and see that Jesus Christ was constantly under attack by Satan, which He suffered through in order to truly know our needs in every situation.

God means exactly what He says, and we have a great High Priest who was under a constant barrage for us because He has been through it, all the way to the stake!

As written in the Amplified Bible, Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:

Ephesians 6:10 (AMP) In conclusion, be strong in the Lord [be empowered through your union with Him]; draw your strength from Him [that strength which His boundless might provides].

Ephesians 6:12 (AMP) For we are not wrestling with flesh and blood [contending only with physical opponents], but against the despotisms, against the powers, against [the master spirits who are] the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spirit forces of wickedness in the heavenly (supernatural) sphere.

We are waging the same battle that Jesus Christ did willingly, in order that He could be a High Priest that was truly tempted in all points just like us, so He could rush to our aid in time of need.

I would like to share one more story with you:

That same Sunday of the Chicago Marathon (that Bill finished in very good time), Nancy and I were at dinner with my brothers Greg and Larry, and their wives. We began talking about the marathon, and I was reminded by Greg that his daughter (our niece) Alison had run that race a number of years before.

Greg and Mary, along with some others who were among the family and friends, were moving from point to point encouraging the runners to keep going. As Alison was approaching the 20-mile mark she was hurting and burned out. As she was entering the last 6 miles (that narrow part of that funnel) she could not push herself any farther, and was very close to quitting.

It just happened right before this that one of our mutual friends, who lives downtown and had himself run the race in the past, called Greg to see how Alison was doing. When he found out she was in trouble he made his way over to the 20-mile marker and ran the last 6 miles with Alison, encouraging her all the way to keep moving forward, in spite of everything that was screaming at her to quit; reminding her that he had gone through the same thing but had finished and so could she! And she did!

With this story in mind, I would like to begin to wind this sermon down by citing a very appropriate Berean that was sent out a week ago last Thursday that was from a sermon John Ritenbaugh gave entitled, “Revelation 2 and 3 and Works: Christ and the End Time” (T084). After citing Christ’s promises to His Body in the seven churches, John said in part:

Can we begin to see Christ’s concern about what is most important to Him at the end? As we draw into that period of time when the pressures are going to be more intense than they have ever been at any time in the history of man? When [Satan](#) is lining up all of his forces, all of his armies, all of his armory? And he is going to mount a persecution against God's people to such an extent that the whole earth will be thrown into convulsions, the likes of which this world has never seen?

Christ, like any good leader, seeing what is coming, is going to take steps to prepare His people. He is going to focus their attention on

what is most important to survive and grow during that period. This is why He talks about what He does to the churches in the messages in Revelation 2 and 3.

The word translated as "overcomes" can just as easily and rightly and correctly be translated "conquers." . . . We are involved in a war against Satan and his demons. In a war against a world he created through men, and against ourselves, to some extent, who carry with us the self-centered nature, habits, and attitudes of [Satan] and his system. Thus, Christ's concern for us as we approach the end is whether we are carrying through in the warfare, whether we are becoming weary in well doing, and enduring to the end, because Satan is bringing about every pressure to make us [surrender].

In conclusion, I want to read to you those encouraging verses from our Marathon Winner, who has run the same race and is drafting us all the way to the finish line!

I will be reading these seven verses from Revelation 2 and 3 from the Good News Bible where Jesus Christ says to His people:

Revelation 2:7 (GNT) "If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches! To those who win the victory I will give the right to eat the fruit of the tree of life that grows in the Garden of God."

Revelation 2:11 (GNT) "If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches! Those who win the victory will not be hurt by the second death."

Revelation 2:17 (GNT) "If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches! "To those who win the victory I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give each of them a white stone on which is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

Revelation 2:26 (GNT) “To those who win the victory, who continue to the end to do what I want, I will give the same authority that I received from my Father: I will give them authority over the nations, to rule them with an iron rod and to break them to pieces like clay pots. I will also give them the morning star.”

Revelation 3:5 (GNT) “Those who win the victory will be clothed like this in white, and I will not remove their names from the book of the living. In the presence of my Father and of his angels I will declare openly that they belong to me.”

Revelation 3:12 (GNT) “I will make those who are victorious pillars in the temple of my God, and they will never leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which will come down out of heaven from my God. I will also write on them my new name.”

Revelation 3:21 (GNT) “To those who win the victory I will give the right to sit beside me on my throne, just as I have been victorious and now sit by my Father on his throne.”

The Word, who gave up all of His rights and privileges as God to become a man, carefully and diligently prepared Himself while on earth to do only the will of the Father, and then ran the race through daily trials and temptations that only began at the beginning of the marathon to the intensity of the crucifixion. He was in all points tried and tested as we are all the way to victory.

He is now drafting us all the way to the finish line, and the victorious place beside Him on His throne! We will finish the marathon together, victorious with our Elder Brother Jesus Christ, who has set the pace and is truly drafting us all the way to the finish line!