

Palm Sunday—C  
Hebrews 12:1-3  
Our Palm Sunday King Came To Win

Heather Dorniden ran on the track team at the University of Minnesota. In 2008, the team was participating in the Big 10 Indoor Championship. Heather was running the finals of the 600m. That's three times around the indoor track. The entire race takes less than 90 seconds. By the end of the first lap, Heather was in second place. As they neared the end of the second lap, Heather had taken the lead. But just as they started the third lap, Heather's legs got tangled with the legs of another runner, and she fell to the ground while the other runners sprinted right by her. In a race that short, any fall is absolutely devastating. But Heather got back up on her feet, and within 15 seconds, half way through the final lap, she had caught the last place runner. As they rounded the final corner, she was closing in on the top two, obviously running faster than everyone else, as everyone was wondering if there was enough track left for her to actually win the race after falling on her face. The winner of the race won by .04 seconds. And the winner of the race was Heather. She fell, and she still won. She didn't want to fall. But the fall didn't stop her from winning. The story of Heather Dorniden reminds us that things don't always go the way that you want. But that doesn't mean you can't still win.

Do you ever have a hard time believing either of those two phrases? I'm assuming there are things in your life that haven't always gone the way you would have wanted. Maybe the job didn't work out. Maybe the one you have is more stressful than you expected. Maybe a relationship you were convinced was going to make you feel like a winner every day ended up making you feel like the exact opposite. Maybe cancer knocked you off your feet. Maybe it was some bad news or diabetes. Like Heather, I think your story is one that shows how things don't always go the way you want. But when that happens, is it easy or difficult for you to believe that you're still going to win?

Think about Palm Sunday. Did that day go the way they wanted? The crowd wildly cheered for Jesus as he came into Jerusalem. It was like a big tent revival—lots of fun, lots of excitement. But do you know what Jesus did the moment the revival ended? In the very next verse after we stopped reading about what happened on Palm Sunday, it says that Jesus, still on his donkey, wept. He wept because he knew that by the end of the week this city he was marching into as king as going to be begging Pilate to crucify him. And we know that none of his disciples wanted that to happen.

But it was in that moment that we find our greatest encouragement to get back up on our feet and keep going when things don't go the way we were planning. When Jesus started weeping, he said the city didn't really know what it was that would bring them peace. But Jesus did. It's the reason he came. It's because he knows how hard it sometimes is to run through life and believe we're going to win. But Jesus believes you can. He believes you will. And the writer to the Hebrews tells us how that can happen: *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne. Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart"* (1-3).

One afternoon when Marnie Rae-Harvey was 15-years-old, she went to sleep with a headache and woke up to find one side of her face covered in blood. The blood had come from her eye. But the doctors couldn't explain why it was happening. They tested her for blood disorders, blood cancer, brain tumors, and arteriovenous malformations, but found nothing. They examined her brain, womb, uterus, ovaries, and chest, but still never found the cause of why it was happening. And it continued to happen. She is now 18 and bleeds from her eyes and from her ears up five times per day, and they still don't know why. The story of Marnie Ray-Harvey is also one that reminds us of how true it is that things don't often go the way you want. But if you were her, how confident would you be that you're still going to win? The answer to that question entirely depends on what your definition of "win" is.

In her situation, maybe you consider a "win" to be an accurate diagnosis, or a day on which she doesn't bleed. But as Christians, our "win" is a little different. The apostle Paul defined our trophy in one of our lessons last Sunday when he said: "*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ*" (Philippians 3:14). Our "win" will always and only be the moment we cross a finish line and find ourselves in the one place where there is no more sickness, death, crying, or pain, where no one gets shot or hurt, where God wipes every bloody tear from our eyes, and we never have to say goodbye to anyone we love ever again. Heaven is our "win." And when we are told to "*keep our eyes fixed on*" the Jesus who gave it to us, we're being told something that is common sense for anyone in any type of race: nothing is more important than the finish line.

Adama Toupalik was one of the best cyclists in the world. He was leading the Men's Cyclocross World Championship when he crossed the line, raised his arms in the air and started celebrating as if he had won. The problem was, he hadn't. In fact, he hadn't even finished the race at that point. The finish line was still one lap away. He started celebrating too early. And because he did, he ended up losing. Now, it wasn't wrong for him to celebrate at that moment. It's a good accomplishment to finish another lap. What hurt him was celebrating that lap as if he had won the prize, when he really didn't.

The same thing can happen in our lives as Christians. On the way to heaven, there are a lot of different things we can celebrate. We can celebrate when someone gets the job they wanted, gets married, has good health, or when the cancer goes away. We can clap for our favorite teams, cheer for our kids, and post pictures of them succeeding at different things—as long as we think less of all these things than we do of heaven. Because as soon as we fix our eyes on any other prize, and crave it more than we crave heaven or the Jesus we have faith in, then we are also in danger of losing the prize entirely. Just like when riding a bike or driving a car, you can't go in two different directions at the same time. You're always going to just one destination. Fixing our eyes on Jesus means that being with him in heaven is the one great goal we treasure more than anything. And this section of the Bible gives us many great examples of individuals who ran that kind of race.

Verse one told us that we are surrounded by "*such a great cloud of witnesses*" (1). Do you know who those witnesses are? People like Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, and the prophets. Those ancient believers are like the crowd in the stadium, the champions who have run in the race before us. Look around to see who is in the stands for a second. They are people who "*were tortured,*" the Bible says. "*They faced jeers and flogging ... were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were persecuted, mistreated, and destitute.*" They were thrown to the lions tossed into flames. And the reason they were is because that was the cost of fixing their eyes on what they

considered their most valuable possession, which was their ... faith. Hebrews chapter 11 is called the “Heroes of Faith” chapter because it is a list of men and women who, for the sake of their faith, were willing to lose everything. And because they were, the chapter concludes, “*the world was not worthy of them*” (38). They didn’t belong here. They didn’t fit in. God had something better in mind for them.

All those believers learned a lesson while they ran the race, and we need to learn it too. “*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily entangles*” (1). The runner does not put on an overcoat and boots to run his race. He wears the scantiest clothing and the lightest track shoes he can buy. He trims every extra ounce of fat off his body. “*Get rid of every burden*” means getting rid of anything at all that would get in the way of our life or faith, even the things that are good gifts of God in themselves.

“Do you remember the rich young man who came to Jesus and asked: “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” The man told Jesus he had kept the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> Commandments. Then Jesus said to him: “*You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” Jesus was not telling the young man that it’s wrong to be rich. He was saying: “This is God’s very first commandment: Love him with all your heart, and do not love anything else above him.” The man left Jesus, we’re told, because he had great possessions. “*Get rid of every burden.*” Perhaps we have too many things. Even good gifts from God can become a burden they get in the way of running the race of faith. Then those things are like the overcoat and boots that a runner needs to throw off. We are in a race, and we need to keep running all out, and with patience.

“*Let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily entangles*” (1). The runner surely won’t forget to tie the laces in his or her track shoes. Our sins tangle up our feet in our race of faith. That is nothing new. Noah had a problem with drunkenness. Jacob was tempted to rely on his own clever scheming to get blessings. David fell for another man’s wife. Peter denied that he was Jesus’ disciple because he valued the opinion of a few servants. None of them would have reached the finish line—everlasting life—if God had not forgiven their sin and then helped them overcome the sin in their lives. We know what had first place in their eyes. They showed us with their lives.

What has first place in yours? When someone sins against you—is it a grudge or forgiveness? When you see an opportunity to give—is it greed or being generous? When you did something well—is it pride or humility? When life doesn’t go the way that you want—are you filled with confidence or worry? When you fall into sin—do you get back up on your feet because you still believe you’re going to win, or do you grow weary and maybe even give up trying again?

Do you know who Derek Redmond is? Derek Redmond was the British 400-meter record-holder when he was only 19 years old. He qualified for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea and easily made it into the finals. 10 minutes before the most important race of his life, however, Derek’s Achilles tendon gave out, and he had to pull out. He didn’t want that to happen. But he didn’t give up. Over the next year he had five different surgeries to repair his Achilles, began training again, and qualified for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. Derek easily got to the semifinal race, in which he very quickly took the lead. Halfway through the race, he was a shoo-in to make the finals, until he heard a loud pop. It was his Achilles. He couldn’t run. The other runners quickly passed him by as Derek tried to hobble to the finish line. His father was sitting in the top row of the stands. When he heard the pop, he knew exactly what

had happened, raced down from the top of the stands, leapt over the railing, outran two security guards, put his arm around his son, bore his weight, and walked with him so that Derek could cross the finish line he had his eyes fixed on. And he did. Even though the race didn't quite go the way he wanted.

And sometimes yours doesn't either. I know that about you. I know that your high hopes for something great sometimes end in disappointment. I know that you sometimes have days that don't go the way you were planning. I know that you sometimes hurt, even though you didn't want that to happen. I know that you don't want to sin. And yet you still do. I know that sometimes on our path through life, the scenery isn't all that pleasant.

But it wasn't for Jesus either. As he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he knew what was waiting for him before that week ended. It was the pop of a hammer pounding nails into his skin. It was the sound of flesh ripping off the bone as his blood poured out onto the ground beneath him. It was the moment the revival would go silent while he hung on a cross naked and shamed in front of everyone who was looking and laughing. And yet: "*he endured the cross*" (2). He "*disregarded its shame*" (2). He thought less of it than the one prize that meant more to him than anything. He thought less of the cross than he did of you. And your salvation. Jesus kept going, though he was so weary, so that he could be punished for all the sins we so easily get entangled in, and so that you and I could walk the rest of our path through life released from the weight of guilt knowing we are forgiven

Jesus is called the "*author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal*" (2). He is the author because he has authored (created) something wonderful for us to have faith in. The King James Version calls Jesus the "finisher." And the reason it does is because, like Derek Redmond's father, he's the one who carries your tired soul on his shoulders and guarantees that you will finish the race and end up winning. "Don't get tired," Jesus says. "You are running the race that leads to glory at my side." Maybe you are bearing some private grief or trouble today and have already carried it a long time. It may be your own burden, or the burden of someone you love, or a burden of caring for someone you love. You wonder whether you can stand it. In chapter 13 Jesus says: "*Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you*" (5). He also points you ahead to the joy that is set before you. Every step on the course of faith brings you closer to the finish line. The trouble will soon pass, but the joy Christ won for you will never pass. There are limits to trouble, but the joy will be boundless.

Do you know who Quincy Watts is? Like Derek Redmond, Quincy Watts also participated in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Like Derek Redmond, Quincy Watts participated in the 400m dash. Unlike Derek Redmond, Quincy Watts won the gold medal in that race. But nobody remembers Quincy Watts. Rather, they remember an act of love that allowed a tired, broken man to cross the one line he had his eyes fixed on. When you are tired, when you are broken, we are told to do the same thing. "*Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*" (3). Fix your eyes on Jesus, our Palm Sunday King who came so that you would win. Amen.