

Spiritual Applications of Not Being Able to Run a Marathon

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October 2015

*A note about this blog: October 25, 2015, is the date when I had hoped to run my second marathon. Around this time last year, after completing my first marathon, I wrote a blog entitled "Spiritual Applications of Running a Marathon." Well, after receiving some news about a stress fracture [10 weeks ago] that would prevent me from running not only the October 25 marathon (or any other fall marathon—or running at all since receiving that news), I thought it would be only appropriate to write a follow-up blog entitled, "Spiritual Applications of **Not** Being Able to Run a Marathon."*

When walking into the orthopedic clinic to receive news of a potential stress fracture, my thoughts were, "Please let me be able to run. Please let me be able to run...the marathon." After an x-ray and an MRI, the results were in, and they were clear. The doctor explained to me that I had a stress fracture, and he explained, "No running for four weeks..." and "No marathon" (Just FYI up-to-date: It's been ten weeks since I've not been able to run.) DISAPPOINTMENT. DISCOURAGEMENT. HOPES DASHED. I had trained all spring and summer. I had been running consistently, and I was getting stronger and stronger. Even after injury, I was hopeful for a return to training. In hearing, "No marathon," that hope was gone. Though I was not shut down from activity completely, I was shut down to my favorite hobby and stress outlet—running. The news that day in the orthopedic clinic was bittersweet—bitter in the fact that I could not run, yet sweet because I could do anything else. Thankfully, I did not have to have a boot or crutches, but I could not run. So, not being able to use my running muscles, I had a choice—I could opt out of activity altogether, or I could choose to maintain fitness by other methods and strengthen other muscles.

Last year after completing my first marathon, I couldn't help but to think about the spiritual applications of running 26.2 miles—especially in light of Hebrews 12. This year's marathon plans turned out a little (no, a lot) differently. As I once again looked at Hebrews 12, my eyes caught many themes in the middle part of the passage... *discipline* (it is used nine times), discipline that *yields fruit*, and especially verse 12: "Strengthen your weak hands and your feeble knees."

There is so much that can be said about Hebrews 12 (other blogs may be forthcoming). In light of the "Hall of Faith" of Hebrews 11, we're encouraged to throw off the things that hinder, the things that entangle (i.e. sin), and to run the race with perseverance—with our eyes fixed on Christ. Along the running journey, though, there will be hardship. Verse 7 notes, "Endure hardship as discipline." An athlete cannot become an athlete without

hardship. Training is not always comfortable. There are early mornings, sore muscles, injuries, and sickness. An athlete cannot become an athlete without training. Training is required despite hardship. Neither can an athlete become an athlete without discipline. The author of Hebrews instructs us to “Endure hardship as discipline” (v. 7). We can be trained by discipline.

I know that my stress fracture is not significant in light of eternity, but the Lord has brought a lot of spiritual application through it. Would I have chosen this stress fracture? No. Have I liked not being able to run for ten weeks? No. Have I been trained by the stress fracture? Yes. Here are just a few of the spiritual applications that I have learned by not being able to run a marathon.

We are prone to put our ultimate hopes in other things than the Lord. Hardship can show us our idols. Running is not a bad thing in and of itself. It is good. It is healthy. It is a great stress outlet. I love being outside (especially this time of year) and looking at God’s creation. Along my marathon-training journey, however, I noticed a shift in thinking. Instead of thinking about the Lord first thing in the morning after waking, my thought was often, “How many miles do I need to run today?” Instead of being focused and centered on my time in the Word and prayer, I often found myself rushing so I could complete mileage before heading into work. Little by little, my priorities became skewed. What I once turned to as a stress outlet, for endorphins, or even for pure enjoyment was gone. I didn’t realize how much I turned to running for my hope and comfort until it was taken away. I’ve had to confess that to the Lord. Was running *always* an idol to me? No, I don’t think so. There were definitely times in my life where it has been, though. During this time period without being able to run, He has used it to draw me back to Himself. My primary “go-to” should be Him—not running (and not anything else).

We want to do what is comfortable. Discipline is not comfortable. I enjoy running. I am comfortable with running. Swimming, however, uses completely different muscles. I can run 10 miles with no problem, but if you put me in the swimming pool before I am in shape swimming, I may be able to go 50 meters without stopping (That is not far, by the way). Let’s apply this concept spiritually for a minute. As human beings, we want to do what is comfortable. Believers are no exception. We may be known to sit in the same pew or chair on the side of the sanctuary or auditorium. We hang out most of the time with the same group of people or people who are like us. God, however, can use our getting out of our comfort zones as spiritual training. It is when we are uncomfortable that we are more aware of our need for Him. Growth is “learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable” [Brad Hambrick]. Is swimming natural to me? No. The more I practice, though, the more I learn to become comfortable with my non-“go-to” sport. The more we place ourselves in a situation that is not natural to us, we learn to adapt to it, and we learn from it.

Knowing something and the *application* of it are two completely different things. I know the mechanics of swimming. I used to be a lifeguard and teach swimming lessons. The first time I entered the pool and “tried” to swim, I realized that my knowledge was not

going to carry me through the practice. Running muscles had been used, but using all of my limbs in the water (i.e. swimming) was not something I had done in years. I had to start again in the pool. I couldn't just pick right back up where I started and have the endurance I had several years ago. I had to practice. It is not possible to get stronger in the pool and swimming without getting in the pool and swimming. In our spiritual lives, we may know the truth of what God's Word says, but if we do not take that truth and apply it, we will not become stronger. Knowing the truth and applying the truth are different. Faith is applying what we already know. Hardships in our lives are often the training ground for using what we already know about who God is and what His Word says. As we remind ourselves again and again of those truths, we strengthen our spiritual muscles and learn to apply them.

The Lord often teaches us more in hardship (if we allow Him) than when things are going well. When dealt something that doesn't go our way (whether it be discipline or something else), we have a choice concerning what we do with it. Lloyd Jones notes that discipline is often "God's gymnasium" for us, but it will not work "automatically." He notes, "The mere fact that we are chastised does not mean that, of necessity, we are going to benefit from it" (*Spiritual Depression*, p. 249). Negative responses to God's discipline include "despising" it (i.e. stuffing it and not dealing with it), fainting under it (e.g. grumbling, complaining [insert my name here]), or becoming bitter. It is only when we submit to discipline that we can be trained by it. With my stress fracture, I may not like the diagnosis, but if I do not follow the doctor's orders and submit to them, I will not get better. Our spiritual lives are like that. We may not understand all of what is happening, but there is a way to accept discipline and be trained by it (Heb. 12:11).

As a coach sees where we need strengthening, so God sees where we need strengthening. Coaches see where form should be corrected. They are able to see where muscles need to be strengthened. To strengthen those muscles, working out is required. It can be a grueling process. Working out weak muscles takes time. Hebrews 12:12-13 notes, "Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed." Lloyd-Jones refers to the process as "physiotherapy," not only treating disease in the joint (the doctor's role), but also putting the patient through various exercises and movements as well (the patient's role). Lloyd-Jones notes, "Massage alone is not enough. You must also get the patient to do his part in making active movements" (page 255, *Spiritual Depression*). Spiritually-speaking, God sees where we are weak. He gives encouragement to remember discipline is for good and that he is treating us as sons and daughters. That is His part. We have a part to play to, however. We must "Strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees" (Heb. 12:12). If the Lord shows us that a foundation is built on anything but Him, it is ours to confess, ours to repent of, and ours to relinquish and give to Him. With my stress fracture, it is only when I accept that I cannot run (and follow through with what I have been told) that I can begin to strengthen other muscles. I may not like to hear that I cannot run, but if I do not submit to the orders, I cannot get better. Discipline is hard, but it is how God strengthens us.

Many other things could be added to this list during this time in my life, but in summary, here are a few that I've learned:

What He has taught me during this season

- I have often turned to running instead of turning to Him.
- Because I have needed help in cycling and swimming (both things in which I need help), I have had to reach out to other people, relying on others instead of myself.
- I have a choice when something is taken away: I can fight, complain, become bitter and resentful, or I can submit to it (to Him) and learn from it. I sometimes do not have a choice with what happens, but I have a choice in what I do with it. (I am so thankful that the Lord is patient with me, because this principle is something that I am consistently learning—practicing—falling—practicing—falling—learning.)
- The Lord is gracious in His love. His discipline is for our good. It refines us. It strengthens us.
- He has taught me more about the importance of strengthening my inner character than my physical body.
- The Lord is a patient coach. Hardships are often “God’s gymnasium” (Lloyd-Jones) to teach us about Him and strengthening our faith.

Did I get to run the marathon on October 25? No. Would I trade this season? No. The Lord has disciplined me through this time, and it has been good. He has been good. You may be going through a difficult season in your life. I encourage you to pick up God’s Word and read the book of Hebrews. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Though we may endure hardship, we see that despite our hardship, despite our sin, we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding our blood (Heb. 12:4). Jesus has. Because He has, we have the greatest encouragement in all the world when it comes to discipline: “The Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons” (Heb. 12:7).