

What Running Taught Me

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Running the race of life! A common cliché, yet also a biblical image, reminding us of key truths.

Think of Hebrews 12:1-2. “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (TNIV). Jesus is both our example and our goal.

Some of us like to run physically as well as spiritually. Coach Mac McDonald got me running cross-country in high school, and I’ve been running ever since—more or less! With time and age, I see more and more connections between physical and spiritual running.

Interesting things happen when I run regularly. If I run faithfully, I lose extra weight, for example. The more I lose weight, the better I run. It’s a kind of balance; an equation. Many Christians run, walk, or swim in order to keep a healthy balance of weight and exercise because they want to “glorify God in [their bodies]” (1 Cor. 6:20).

Glorifying God in our bodies is Christian virtue. To be spiritual is to be physical. Our Lord Jesus Christ “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). In the New Creation our physical bodies will be resurrected to be like Jesus’ own body. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5).

Lessons from Running

What do running and other exercise actually teach us? Here are my top learnings:

First, *physical, spiritual, and mental health are all linked*. They reinforce each other. It’s hard to be spiritually alert if you’re physically ill. If I am sick and unable to run, that affects me mentally and emotionally. Running helps me understand more deeply the intimate ties between spirit, body, and mind. It makes me more alert spiritually and mentally.

Running reminds me just how physical I am! It shows me also the beauty of the world around me; the joy of inhabiting God’s good earth, especially if I run outdoors, gadget-free.

A second learning: *Discipline becomes easier the more we practice it*. If I haven’t run for awhile, it’s hard to get back into practice. But running becomes easier and more enjoyable as I persist. Practice doesn’t make perfect, but it makes pleasant.

Same with spiritual disciplines. Prayer, Bible study, devotional reading, generosity, recycling, and participation in Christian community become easier and more rewarding the

more we do them. As we exercise ourselves spiritually (in biblically sound ways) we grow spiritually. The more we grow spiritually, the more disciplined we become. It's a sort of cycle.

This is actually my third learning: *Life moves in cycles; repeated patterns*. We live cycles of days, months, seasons, and years. This is how God made the world (Gen. 1:14; Ex. 20:8-11, 31:15-16; Ps. 104:19; Acts 14:17).

Cycles can work for you or against you. If I've put on extra weight from overeating, I tend to run slower. But if I push against that and run faster, I tend to lose weight. The more I run, the more fit I feel; the more fit I feel, the better I run. That's life.

Many people are not physically able to run, of course, but the principle still holds. We live by cycles that work for us or against us.

The same is true with the physical creation and how we treat it. Humans have dominion over the earth, constructively or destructively. Cycles of life and cycles of death run throughout the created order. Cycles of death, introduced by sin, include the human sin of failing to care for God's good earth and for children, born and unborn.

Cycles of life and death are everywhere—in culture and economics, just as much as in our bodies and spirits. Healthy cycles—for instance, daily and weekly patterns of enough food, rest, exercise, and productive work—increase our health and well-being. But unhealthy cycles—insufficient sleep and rest, too little or too much food, overwork—undermine our health. These are cycles of death.

Life-nurturing cycles are God's way in Christian discipleship and in creation. Consider how Nature cycles and recycles. Empowered by the Spirit and Christian community, cycles of life not only help us grow spiritually. They actually contribute to the coming of God's New Creation in fullness.

Working the Cycles

Some of our most important cycles are grounded in Christian community. As Christians we run *together*, not alone. On the Jericho road there's room for more than just two. Often as Christians we "come to the garden" *together*, not "alone, while the dew is still on the roses." In Christian community we need cycles and disciplines of life together; shared life.

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20). This gathering in Jesus' name and presence is essential Christian discipline (Heb. 10:24-25). The cycles of daily disciplines, frequent fellowship, weekly worship, and the Christian year remind us how God works in history and of how he put the world together.

We need a healthy biblical balance. We can live by life-giving rhythms of the Spirit. This means respecting and engaging the rhythms of physical as well as spiritual life.

Here is the deeper reason why recycling paper, plastics, leftover food, and other

“waste” makes sense. Recycling works *against* cycles of death and *with* cycles of life. The authors of the book *Redeeming Creation* put it this way:

We extend a Christian response to God’s creation when we begin to use less and save more. Those who recycle their own bottles and cans live with integrity. Those who persuade the city council to make recycling part of the normal garbage-collection procedure have changed their world. The reason to recycle materials or to compost leaves goes beyond compliance with local ordinances. It is within compliance of greater ordinances, cycles that God created for the world in which we live (Fred Van Dyke, *et al.*, *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship*, p. 145).

Science tells us that all life is about inputs, outputs, and “throughputs.” The technical term is *ecology*—the interconnection of all things in one system, or one “house” (*oikos* in the Greek New Testament, the basis for “ecology”), as created by God. Jesus knew this: “What goes into your mouth does not defile you, but what comes out of your mouth, that is what defiles you”—that is, the “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” that come from the heart. Eating food does not defile, for “whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body” (Mt. 15:11, 17-20 TNIV). That’s the normal cycle. “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19 TNIV).

We live in interconnected physical-spiritual systems and cycles. Christian discipleship means working *with* all life-giving cycles and *against* those that bring death or evil. Let us then “encourage one another daily, . . . so that none of [us] may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:13 TNIV). These things I ponder as I run.

The Longer Race

Finally, *running even teaches me something about eschatology*, the doctrine of “last things.” I’m less tired or winded at the end of the run than halfway through. This is due to the “second breath” or “second wind” runners get once their bodies have adjusted to the pace. So also in our discipleship: Energy actually increases as we catch the pace, as we continue on, as we press toward the goal ahead, ever nearer.

Here is good news! Though we can’t all run *physically*, we can all run *spiritually*. As ageing makes us slow down *physically*, we can pick up the pace *spiritually*. So “let us lay aside every weight, . . . and let us run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-2). The risen Jesus says where he leading us. “In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells” (2 Pt. 3:13 TNIV).

[Scripture quotations are from the NRSV except as otherwise noted.]