

What is the greatest determining factor in success? Is it your family background? Where you were born and where you grew up? Is it connections— who you know and who knows you? Is it IQ, intelligence or raw talent or physical ability? Is it education and training? Does where you went to school or who coached you make the most difference?

Mark Moore in the Core 52 book mentions the research done by psychologist Angela Duckworth. I looked her up and have been reading her book, *Grit*. She spent years studying highly successful people in achievement driven fields as widely diverse as West Point graduates to award winning authors to wine critics.

What Angela Duckworth discovered is that it isn't intelligence or wealth, education, race, background, or any other demographic factor that determined success. Instead she found it was a "combination of passion and perseverance that made high achievers special." It was their ability to endure for the long haul, a character quality Duckworth calls "Grit."

Let me just share with you one example from her book. Chapter 1 talks about what it takes to make it through West Point. Every year, there are 14,000 applicants, a process that starts your junior year in high school. You must have a nomination from a member of congress, a senator, or the Vice President of the United States. Only 4,000 get this required nomination. Of these 4,000, slightly more than half meet the stringent academic and physical standards. Of this select group, only 1,200 are enrolled. 20% will drop out before graduation.

Many of those who drop out, do so in the first seven weeks, during what is called Beast Barracks. Each day begins at 5 am with an hour and a half of intense physical training. It continues all day with a constant rotation of formation, drills, training, classes, and workouts and concludes at 10 pm with taps. There are no weekends, no breaks, and no outside contact.

The whole point is to find out who has grit and who doesn't, and for those who do, it's designed to help them gain even more grit.

The author of Hebrews would agree with Angela Duckworth about grit. Our Core passage this week, Hebrews 12:1-2, is all about gaining grit in our spiritual lives. In this second to the last week of Core 52, and the last week of 2020, a year that has tested our patience like no other, that has worn away our wherewithal, how appropriate it that we focus on gaining grit.

In some ways Hebrews is a bit of a mystery, because we're not sure who wrote it. Unlike the other letters of the New Testament, no one signed their name to the letter. Some think it was the Apostle Paul, but the style of writing is so different from Paul's letters. Other possibilities include Apollos, or the husband and wife team of Aquila and Priscilla.

What we do know from reading Hebrews is that it is a very Jewish book. It's written to Jewish Christians, most likely who live in Rome. They believe Jesus is the promised Messiah, but

they're having trouble leaving behind some of their Jewish ways of thinking and doing things. There is a temptation to give up on the faith, to quit the race, and go back to the old covenant.

The whole point of Hebrews is that the New Covenant is the fulfillment of everything hoped for in the Old Covenant, and that Jesus is superior to anything the Old Covenant has to offer. So the author of Hebrews is saying, "Don't give up. Don't go back. Stick with Jesus, because he is the finish line of our faith. Have enough grit to run the race and finish it.

Here is what Hebrews 12:1-2 says,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Our journey of faith is like a marathon race, the ultimate test of endurance. Following Jesus is a marathon, not a sprint. Gaining grit is about the long haul, not a 50 meter dash. It's not about how you start, but about how you finish.

There are three things we need to do to gain grit and finish strong in the marathon of faith. And these three commands are bookended by two inspirational motivations.

Inspiring Motivation #1 – Look to Those Who Ran Before You

The author of Hebrews, be it Paul or Priscilla, wants you to know that you can run the race because others have run it before you. Verse 1 opens with this inspiring motivation, "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.*" This cloud of witnesses should motivate us, but who's he talking about? Who are these witnesses?

Remember what I told you about whenever you see a "therefore" in the Bible, you need to find out what it is... there for. Therefore tells us that what is said here in Hebrews 12 is based on what came before. Hebrews 11 is known as the faith Hall of Fame. It's a Who's Who of the Old Testament. Each one of their lives provides vivid testimony of what is possible with faith in God. These are heroes of the faith who overcame all sorts of challenges and failures to run the race.

Hebrews 11 isn't filled with perfect people. They all had a flawed faith. Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's lying, Moses' murder, David's adultery, and yet they ran the race. They endured. They didn't quit. Here's how chapter 11 summarizes their grit in verses 33-38,

[They] conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in

two, they were killed with the sword. (And you thought 2020 was rough) They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

These are the “*great cloud of witnesses.*” All of these people who ran the race before you and they made it. They ran the race. They made it to the finish line. They endured.

Why are they called witnesses? What does this mean? First, their life offers testimony that it can be done, that the race can be won, and that God is faithful to the end. Picture Moses and Noah and Abraham and Deborah and Gideon, and Esther and David and Solomon and all the different prophets— Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and all rest in heaven looking at you saying, “I made it and so can you.”

They are also witnesses in the sense they are like this crowd in the stands cheering you on. They are watching as you run the race. The finish line for the ancient marathon was in the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, Greece. It held 50,000 fans. They would all come to watch the end of the race as the runners crossed the finish line.

I think the author of Hebrews has this kind of scene in mind when he says we “*are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.*” He’s picturing all these heroes of faith cheering you on as you run your race. “Go! Go! You can do it! You’re almost there!”

When you’ve been knocked down and you don’t think you can get back up. When you feel like giving up. When you’re hurt way deep down and you don’t think you can keep going, hear their voices. Listen to their cheers. Be encouraged. Stay strong. Keep running.

There are others in the crowd. Others who went before you. Grandparents. Maybe your mom or your dad, and aunt or uncle. A friend who once shared their faith. A youth pastor who accepted you for you. A preacher who opened up the Bible and helped you understand like never before. Who else is in the stands cheering for you?

Sometimes it feels like everyone is against you. You feel like you’re in this all alone, and no one is on your side. You are not alone. The stands are filled with those cheering you on. Picture all of them in the heavenly grandstands looking down cheering you on in the marathon of life.

I. Don’t Let Anything Slow You Down

The first thing, if you want to finish well, is don’t let anything slow you down. Get rid of the things that encumber you on the journey. Verse one says, “*let us also lay aside every weight.*” If it weighs you down, you don’t need it.

Now remember, the author is comparing life and faith to a marathon race. Do you know how ancient runners ran? Do you know what they wore? Nothing. In the ancient Olympics athletes

competed in the buff, au natural. They didn't want anything to weigh them down or encumber them. Picture a marathon runner wearing bulky boots, or decked out in jewelry like a rapper.

The same thinking holds true today, but we have a greater scientific understanding of what helps and what gets in the way. A runner might carry extra weights in training to build strength, muscle tone, and endurance, but for the race itself you get rid of every ounce you can. In cycling, they are called weight weenies, these are riders who shave every gram of weight off their bikes possible. There are road bikes today as light as 13 pounds. That really helps when you're going uphill.

In the 2008 Olympics, 98% of the swimming medals were won by swimmers wearing a state of the art suit made by Speedo that had been scientifically designed to get rid of everything that would slow a swimmer down. The waterproof fabric repelled water. It changed the swimmer's shape to make them sleek as possible and it added buoyancy so more of the swimmer's energy was directed toward forward momentum. Record after record was smashed, and eventually the suits were banned because competitors claimed it gave athletes an unfair advantage.

Well, in the marathon of life, you want every advantage you can get. There are some things in life that aren't wrong in and of themselves. It's not a sin. It's not immoral. They have their place in life, but sometimes we allow them to get in the way of running the race, and they slow us down. Imagine a runner in a race wearing big, over-ear, Beats headphones.

Take sports. Good exercise. Good for your physical health. It can help your mental health, but what happens when sports become so important in our lives that it keeps us from worship, from fellowship, from spiritual growth, from serving, and pursuing God's best for our lives? A lot of hobbies and interests can be like that. Satan can use them to distract us, slow us down, and ultimately keep us from the finish line.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying all hobbies and interests are bad. Even Jesus went fishing. God wants us to enjoy our lives here. Life on earth was God's idea. He wants us to enjoy the journey. 1 Timothy 4:4 says, *"For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."* But we have to be careful that our enjoyment of these things doesn't weigh us down and stand in the way of the finish line.

Even legitimate duties and life concerns like family, careers, and community service can become big and bulky distractions that slow down your pursuit of God's best. What things slow down your progress in faith? Get rid of the things that encumber you. If it slows you down it could keep you from getting to the finish line. Is there any streamlining that needs to take place in your life? Some thing your need to downsize or cast aside? Don't let anything slow you down.

II. Don't let anything trip you Up

Secondly, don't let anything trip you up. Picture a runner whose shoe comes untied, they trip over the laces and are taken out of the race. Let me show you an example of something small tripping someone up. (Show Tim Tebow video)

Go back to verse 2, *"let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely."*

It's talking about getting tangled up in a sin that trips you up. These are the blatant sins and immoral habits that flat-out sabotage what God is doing in your life. Whether it's gluttony, gossip, an out of control temper or porn-fed lust, every sin is a snare that is designed to trip you up and keep you from reaching the finish line.

Even small sins. All sins start out as small sins. Satan will try to convince you to underestimate the danger of every sin in your life. You will rationalize, "it's no big deal." You will defend. "Everyone does it." But even the smallest sin has the potential to become a race ending catastrophe. Every failure that causes a life of faith to crash and burn began as a little sin, a small compromise, a slight indiscretion.

Every pastor whose ministry crashed on the rocks of a steamy affair. Every ministry volunteer who's embezzled money from the ministry they served. Every child raised in the church only to question everything they were taught because dad couldn't control his tongue or mom indebted the family up to their eyeballs, for every faith lost simply due to neglect, it all begins with some small thing that trips you up.

Deal with sin while it is still a small thing. Sins must be destroyed or they will destroy you. You are not the exception. It can and will happen to you.

III. Keep on running

Number three. Keep on running. Keep running and don't stop. One foot in front of the other. The end of verse 1 says, *"let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."* Don't just run. Run with endurance. This is a steadfast, never give up, never give in persistence. It doesn't stop, and if it gets knocked down, it gets back up again and always keeps on running.

Our on-demand, insta-culture will constantly fight against your perseverance. We want our content in 30 seconds or less. We want meals we can make in 30 minutes or less, and we think life-change can happen in 30 days or less. Running the race with endurance is about persisting through days that turn into years that turn into decades that turn into a lifetime.

We are not good at patient endurance. I recently read an article about how technology and modern life is rewiring our brains to have far less endurance than previous generations. According to their research, we lose our patience if...

- Water takes longer than 28 seconds to boil.
- Food at a restaurant takes longer than 14 minutes to arrive

- A response to an important email takes longer than 90 minutes
- If it takes more than 11 minutes of charging before our phone will turn on.
- More than 13 minutes to retrieve our luggage after a flight
- We will wait in line for 30 seconds before switching to a line we think is shorter or faster.

Don't you think all of this has an impact on our lives spiritually? Sure it does. We lose our patience with our church family. We grow frustrated that God is taking so long to do something. We wonder why spiritual growth doesn't happen faster. We get angry when something doesn't go our way or we don't get what we want. It's destroying our ability to run the race with endurance.

Let me give you a picture of someone who kept on running. These are outtakes from the diary of John Wesley. He was a great preacher of the 1700s who led a great revival in England. Early in his ministry, he experienced great failure and was banned from many churches. By the time he died, he was eulogized as "the most beloved man in all of England."

1738

- Sunday a.m., May 7, preached in St. Lawrence's, was asked not to come back anymore.
- Sunday p.m., May 7, preached at St. Katherine Cree's church, deacons said, "Get out and stay out."
- Sunday a.m., May 14, preached at St. Ann's, can't go back there either.
- Sunday afternoon, May 21, preached at St. John's, kicked out again.
- Sunday evening, May 21, preached at St. somebody else's, Bennet's maybe, deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.

1739

- Tuesday, May 8, afternoon service, preached in a pasture in Bath, 1,000 people came to hear me.
- Sunday, September 9, preached to 10,000 people three weeks in a row in Moorfields.

Nobody would have blamed him if he quit in 1738. It would have been perfectly understandable. Think of how much would have been lost, if he didn't keep on running. So, keep on running in your marriage. Keep on running with your kids. Keep on running in your faith.

Inspiring Motivation #2 – Look to Jesus

I want to end the sermon, the same way our Core Passage ends– with a second inspiring motivation. As we run the race, our author says look to Jesus. We run with endurance by...

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus didn't just invent the race. He's the finish line. This word *perfecter* means "one who completes. To accomplish or finish." He ran the race. He won it. He shows us the way, and he's waiting for you at the finish line.

In a marathon you can't see the finish line. It's a long ways away. It's not around the next corner or over the next rise. It's nowhere on the horizon, so it becomes very easy to lose mental sight of your destination.

It's easy to be distracted by things much nearer at hand. How much your calf muscles are aching. How nice it would be just to sit down for a bit have crack open a cold one. You gotta keep your eyes on the prize. It's easy for these distractions to get you off track.

I've never done a marathon, but I've done what is known as a century— a hundred mile bicycle ride all in one go. A lot of people begin a century. It's a huge mass of cyclists that take off from the starting line. Some of them are in costume. There are clowns, and superheroes with capes and people carrying ET in a basket. You see some wild bikes too. Some of them have every accessory imaginable. Some are cool custom builds, and some of them are simply pimped-out in the most extravagant ways. Some riders bring Bluetooth speakers blasting their favorite tunes. That's what it's like at the starting line.

The finish line is another matter entirely. Not near as many people cross that line. Some go only 10 or 20 miles to spend the rest of the day drinking beer with friends. Others drop out at 50 or 75 miles, their bikes are too weighed down to go any further. At the 100 mile mark, you don't see any costumes or bikes festooned with festive decorations. You see only riders who were committed to finishing the race. They trained for the long run, they only brought what would help them finish, they paced themselves, and they persevered to the end.

The same thing happens in the journey from baptistery to burial. If you're going to gain grit in the marathon of life, you have to keep your eyes on Jesus and keep heading for that finish line knowing that the joy which awaits us there far outweighs anything we let go here.