

The Crown of Righteousness

Psalm 65 & 2 Timothy 4:6-22

Rev. James Ramsey, October 27, 2013, **View from the Ancient Pew** Series #7

For seven weeks now we have entertained a “View from the Ancient Pew.” Each week we have read a text from Paul’s Letters to Timothy – advice and admonition from the Apostle, to his younger protégé. Timothy was pastoring churches that Paul had helped start.

We have glimpsed the workings of the early church, almost as if we were part of an archaeological dig! We’ve also picked up practical wisdom for our own modern walk with Christ. Paul is now wrapping up his letters and his ministry.



He has some pointed things to say. Several colleagues have deserted him or done him harm. The Apostle lists names, as if to say – beware of these ones, Timothy. And he also shares greetings for faithful kingdom workers, who he clearly misses. Paul lists some very personal requests – for one, he’s left his favorite cloak behind and wants it back – and he also is missing his precious books, and especially the parchments.

He references the “first defense” which might refer to an early trial in Jerusalem or to some legal procedure in connection with his current imprisonment. Whatever the situation, the point is that despite his feelings of abandonment, Paul was not alone. God stood with him in order that the mission might not fail. As a result, the Apostle was rescued from the lion’s mouth – a very biblical image (from Psalm 22) where the plea is – “Save me from the mouth of the lion.”

Paul says among other things, “I have finished the race.” And he imagines receiving from the Lord “the crown of righteousness.” The Apostle has used such race language before. Writing to the Corinthians, he said:

²⁴Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. ²⁵Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown.

Have you thought of your faith life as a race, with a prize at the end? How might such a framework encourage you as a Christian? When we think of Paul's words about the race and receiving a crown – we might very well think of the Olympics.



Most of us cannot imagine competing on such a stage. What if you could though? What if you made it to the Olympics, and did well? Only a select few win a gold medal. But what if you won an Olympic medal other than gold... which would you prefer—the silver or the bronze? ...

Seems like a no brainer, doesn't it? Of course, everyone would prefer the silver, right?

Actually...Wrong...

Most of us would assume the silver medal winners would be happier than the bronze medalists since they received a higher honor, but researchers have found that isn't the case. The bronze medalists, who came in third place, were found to be happier and more satisfied than the silver medalists, who finished in second place.

The former Olympians explained to interviewers how they felt about their medals.

The third-place winners were thrilled just to have won a medal. The silver medalists, on the other hand, felt like losers because they didn't come in first place. Curious! Perhaps what happens to you is not nearly as important as how you perceive what happens to you.





Next weekend, nearly 50,000 runners from around the world will compete in the New York City marathon. It will take 12,000 working volunteers to administrate the race.

There will likely be over 2.5 million spectators lining the 26.2-mile course, which winds its way through the city's five boroughs: Staten Island, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Manhattan – ending in Central Park. This year's race will feature heightened security due to the bombings at the Boston Marathon in April. Some of the runners will race for the prize while others will consider a respectable finish to be a great accomplishment.

Running a marathon is no longer on my bucket list. After two knee surgeries, I have made some adjustments to my life aspirations! But I'm not the only one. Apparently, even some die-hard marathoners themselves, are taking traditional marathons off their lists of to-dos. Some of those seasoned athletes now believe that running such a long horizontal distance again and again over time can really beat up the body, not to mention the fact that logging mile after mile on the course can get kind of monotonous.

An increasing number of those runners, in fact, are eschewing the races on the streets, in favor of the buildings that tower over them -- buildings that contain miles of stairs within their dizzying heights.

I'm talking about the sport of Tower Running, which is essentially "professional stair climbing." Have you heard of this?



Kristin Frey is a 29-year-old environmental scientist who turned to stair climbing after qualifying for the Boston Marathon 10 times and running a bunch of other marathons. She turned to what we might characterize as "vertical racing" after a friend encouraged her to try it. She soon became hooked on running up stairs instead of pounding pavement.



Kristin is now the best female U.S. athlete in the sport, and currently is ranked second in the world. She recently ran a groundbreaking 24-hour endurance event in Jacksonville, Florida, where she and three fellow climbers repeatedly scrambled up the Bank of America Tower's 42 floors. By the time they were finished, they had logged 123,480 steps and 5,880 floors -- the equivalent of scaling Mount Everest two and a half

times. She's run up most of the tall buildings in the United States, including the Sears Tower in Chicago and the Empire State Building.

Most of us would consider running up 5,880 floors to be, well, impossible. Why not use the elevator? In fact, Kristin says that the recovery time for running all those stairs, mostly two at a time, is longer than that of a marathon. It sometimes takes her two or three days to recuperate. Once she passes the timing mat, she usually falls and will crawl out of other racer's ways, trying to catch her breath. She describes her legs as feeling all "Jello-y," and she gets blisters on her hands from grabbing the rails, so that now, to protect her skin, she uses the football gloves NFL wide-receivers use.

While running vertical can surely be tough, it's also a great way for all of us to achieve good health, a sense of satisfaction and a stronger desire to keep moving. It can help us keep going in the race of life.

You get the sense from reading Paul's letter to Timothy that he's sort of feeling like a tower runner, having climbed countless "steps" as he traveled all over the Roman world preaching the gospel of Christ. Paul had certainly had his own share of blisters, falls, and scrapes from the myriad of beatings and imprisonments he endured. But now, as he stands at the top of the vertical race that was his life as an apostle, Paul realizes that the race was all worth it. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith," he writes. "From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

For Paul, the race was always vertical because it was always about focusing upward on Christ. In his Letter to the Philippians, he puts it like this: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call in Jesus Christ." To the Colossian Christians he writes, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

Paul spent most of his life traveling long horizontal distances, but he was always looking up toward a higher calling and a prize worth racing toward step by step. Indeed, it was the focus on the prize awaiting him at the top of those steps that kept him going, along with the constant steps of the Lord beside him, giving him "strength," rescuing him from "the lion's mouth," and saving him for "[God's] heavenly kingdom".

Paul has been writing all this to his young protégé, Timothy. Paul is, in effect, passing the baton to Timothy. Timothy will continue the race, the long climb of following Christ. We run that same race.

Following Jesus isn't just about waiting for some heavenly elevator that will take us to the Promised Land someday. It's rather about the hard work of climbing step by step toward the goal. Those steps are taken in devotion, worship, service, compassion and justice -- steps we take every day that lead to health for us, hope for others and the renewed health of God's good creation. We are each called to pick up the baton and continue the vertical race toward the crown of righteousness.

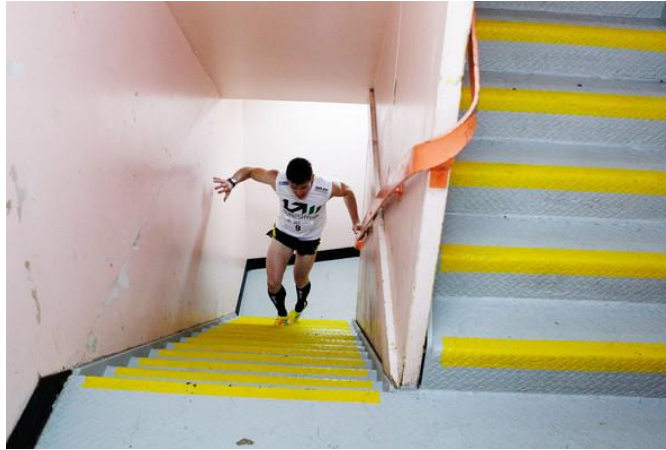
How do we do that? What training tips can we use for the climb? Here are a three tips from Kristin Frey and others who run the vertical race for fun:

Keep running up



Very few tower runners have the nagging injuries of marathoners, so long as they keep running up. Running down the stairs, on the other hand, can lead to a wide variety of injuries and the potential for falls. We gain strength by focusing upward – always guided by God's Word (3:16), lifting our hearts in prayer, lifting up others through service. We run up by daily cultivating our relationship with God in Christ and serving others. Such focus helps us to keep moving toward the finish line one step at a time.

Use the rails



The best tower runners, like Kristin, use the handrails to their advantage, grabbing the rail and pulling themselves up like yanking on a rope. The rails provide the helping hand that gets the runner to the next level. Think of your church family as acting like those rails, encouraging you to keep moving, pulling you up when you are sagging and strengthening you each week for the climb.

Even the strongest, most faithful among us will sometimes need something or someone to lean on. Paul envisioned the church as a support for everyone whom Christ calls.

It's all about finishing well



The point of every race is to finish. Some will finish faster and stronger than others, but everyone who undertakes a race does so to do their best. We know that tower

running is becoming more popular because it's something anyone can do, even if they'll never be as fast as Kristin. In fact, tower running is never about racing directly against your opponent. All tower runners compete against themselves and the clock, doing their best to finish the race in their own best time. The vertical race of following Jesus is about doing the best we can, too. It's not about comparing ourselves to others, but encouraging each other to do the best we can in running the race to achieve the prize - the upward calling of God in Christ.



You may not be running in the New York City Marathon next week, but you can choose to take the stairs every day. While we all will cover some serious horizontal ground in the next week, we can choose to lift our eyes and our souls toward heaven. Let us run the race with perseverance, looking to that crown of righteousness set aside for each of us.