

You Are Tough Enough to Keep Running!

A sermon based on Hebrews 12:1-3

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friends, there is an epidemic coursing its way through our country, and many of you, I'm afraid to admit, have been ensnared. Ok, ok, maybe the wrong choice of words, it's really not that negative at all. But there is a not-so-new fad taking over our country, and many of you have jumped on board. Our First Lady has undertaken this issue as her primary initiative. It's the fight to make a healthier you...the fight to make a healthier America.

Everywhere you look, there are new and old diets being advertised, all different types of exercise regimens taking root, and by far, what is most popular for getting fit today, races. Man alive, are there tons of races...even here in Fairbanks, you're running in the spring when there's still snow on the ground for the Beat Beethoven 5k, with probably a dozen or more races during the summer months, and then ending with the Equinox Marathon, at a time when there's sometimes snow on the ground.

But there's one race in particular I'm thinking about this morning. It's called a Tough Mudder. And no, this is about surviving an Alaskan winter in Fairbanks because almost all of you here would be winners. No, the Tough Mudder is a grueling 10-11 mile race/obstacle course, designed by British Special Forces, intended to test your all-around strength, stamina, mental grit, and camaraderie. So, besides just running 10 miles, every mile or so there's an intense obstacle, like the Arctic Enema, a huge tub full of ice water, where you have to swim underneath a wooden plank. Or there's the Cage Crawl, where you're on your back, pulling yourself through the water across 60 feet of cage with only 6 inches of breathing room. Or the Electroshock Therapy, running through a mud-pit full of hanging live wires, some carrying as much as 10,000 volts.

Some might say you'd have to be literally insane to try a race like this. My brother has done it twice. But this race has become widely popular as it puts this penetrating question in front of participants, "Are You Tough Enough?"

Every day, as believers in Christ, you and I are all involved in a different Tough Mudder. It's a race to get out alive, to get through this life, with all its temptations and obstacles and pitfalls so we can reach our final goal, heaven. And it's hard. So the question remains, "Are You Tough Enough?"

If you look through the chapter before our verses this morning, you can see heroes of faith, those believers throughout the Old Testament who proved themselves to be tough enough in their earthly race.

But you know, not one of those heroes could have done it on their own. Like Abraham, who in faith, patiently waited for God to give him and Sarah a child, but it took God continually encouraging him and reminding him of his promise that his descendants would be numerous as the stars.

Or like Moses, the leader, the rock of the Israelites as they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land over 40 years, but this from a man who originally tried every excuse in the book so he could get out of being Israel's deliverer. But God was with him.

And David, goodness, if ever there was a man who was after the Lord's own heart, David was it. But even he had his downfalls, adultery, murder, lies, deception.

That's just a small sampling of the Hall of Faith of Hebrews 11. All of these heroes were sinners just like you and me, and yet through them and through their God-give faith in Jesus, God did some incredible things. He made them tough enough.

That's the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us in our earthly journey. They aren't merely spectators, but these heroes serve as inspiring examples to you and me in our journey, or, what the writer to the Hebrews calls it, our "race," which in the Greek is the word from which our word agony comes. You see, this life, this race, isn't supposed to be a simple jog through the park. No, it's difficult. It's hard. It's a challenge involving immense exertion and intense struggle.

So, really, for a good comparison, it's like you and I are running a spiritual Tough Mudder. It's an extreme event where there's our goal, heaven, and our prize, the crown of eternal life, directly in front of us, and littered along the way...or, maybe a better word, strategically placed by Satan along the way are the obstacles, the barriers of sin we have to crawl under, climb over, jump across, run through, to make it to the other side.

So, are you tough enough? There's really no sugarcoating what's lying before us on our spiritual journey. We have an enemy, the devil, who is scarier than the deadliest psychopathic serial killer, who knows our every weakness, and who is not afraid to pull out all the stops in getting us to lose this race.

So, what obstacles are you facing? The Tough Mudder has the Fire Walker, where you're running among pits of blazing firewood. In our race, Satan blocks us with our pet sins, the sins we fall into time and time again, to the point where we don't even think about it as we're sinning, like the white, "harmless" lies that are never harmless, or the gossip that just naturally rolls off your tongue, or the cursing that has more or less become a normal part of your vocabulary. You're running through fire, and sooner or later you're going to get burned.

The Tough Mudder has the Hangin' Tough, where you swing on rings over a pool of ice-cold water. In our race, Satan tempts us with society, where the rules of what is right or wrong is constantly changing, and if you're not changing with the times and being more tolerant, then you're in the wrong, then you're discriminated against. And so, the temptation is to be more accommodating, but it takes just missing one ring of perfection, and you're falling, failing.

The Tough Mudder has Twinkle Toes, where you race across a narrow plank above a pond of ice-laden water. In our race, Satan has us running over a narrow plank as well, as you and I struggle to fight the urge to sin every day. But it only takes one poke, one nudge from the devil, and you lose your balance

and topple over into the pond of lust or hatred or greediness or depression or idolatry, sins that can drown us for eternity.

Fellow runners, it appears we are fighting a losing battle. If it's not the obstacles Satan has constructed that are hindering us, then you and I are the ones who are slowing ourselves down and tripping ourselves up.

The writer here tells us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." He encourages us to rid ourselves of the extra clothing or equipment that only serves to slow us down on the course. The sense of pride, that "I can do it all by myself; I don't need God," throw it off. The attitude that "I'm going to do this because it's what I want to do, even if it's not what God wants me to do," throw it off. We need to because it's those thoughts, those attitudes that weigh us down and entangle us and trip us up and cause us to fall into sin time and time again.

There's so much hindering us in our spiritual race, you know, sometimes, we just want to scratch, just be done with it all, but that way leads to eternal death. Sometimes, we'd rather just sprint our way through, really be on guard against temptation at first, but on our own we can't keep up that pace. That way leads to death.

We could try to take it easy and coast the whole way through, but there's no way Satan's obstacles won't best us. That way leads to death.

Are you tough enough? I'm really not, and neither are you. Not by ourselves.

But you know, the Tough Mudder we call our earthly life, our spiritual fight, it's not an individual sport. The goal is not to be the one who gets done with the fastest time. No, the goal is just to finish, and to be able to do that, you need teammates.

To beat Satan's obstacles, we need help. We can't climb that 20-foot wall of sin separating us from God by ourselves. We need help. We need a teammate. And, by nothing but the grace of God, we have one. His name is Jesus.

You think we have it tough, that it seems sometimes the whole world is fighting against us. That God can't possibly know how difficult our obstacles are. That I'm the only one who is dealing with this struggle, and it's not fair.

Consider Jesus. I mean, take a serious look at Jesus and everything he endured for you. He ran his race perfectly, in spite of every assault Satan threw his way, and look through the gospels and you'll see plenty, far more than you and I have suffered. But Jesus overcame them every time, unscathed.

But he knew our struggles. He saw us slipping and falling into sin, and climbing and falling into sin, and swinging and falling into sin, so Jesus did what made him happy.

For his joy, Jesus, who is the author of our faith, the one who created it in us, and who is the perfecter, the one who has promised he will bring our faith to perfect completion, which means he'll bring us to

the end of the race...for his joy, Jesus endured the cross. The shame and the scorn of bearing our sins, our failures, and being nailed to a cross to suffer the wrath of God for every sin of all time and then to die for them, Jesus endured it, willing, joyfully.

And then he rose. You know the joy and triumph of marathon runners when they cross the finish line? Jesus' resurrection was even more triumphant, because his life, his death, his resurrection, his entire race concluded with us completely and absolutely forgiven. Our falling and failings wiped away and forgotten for good.

And that's where you and I are today. Cleansed, forgiven, saved. Because of Jesus, our final destination is already set in stone. Because of Jesus, we will win the race.

But we're not there yet, and we can't for one second think that Satan's going to let up and make the obstacles easier for us.

But at the same time, Jesus prepares us to run. He's given us the cloud of witnesses. The Old Testament heroes who ran faith's course successfully, they're our supporters. They're rooting for us. They can encourage us in our run, encourage us to persevere, to keep going strong. But, they can't give us the strength.

For ongoing strength and stamina we need to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

Do you know what it means to fix your eyes on Jesus? It means keeping our eyes ahead..on Jesus. It means turning on our blinders to everything else in this life, the sin that's trying to throw us off track. It means focusing on the cross because there we have forgiveness through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It means to keep running, even if we do get caught in one of Satan's obstacles, or even if the burden seems to heavy to bear because we remember Paul's encouragement, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

The Tough Mudder touts itself as being "Probably the Toughest Event on the Planet," and for good reason. If you're looking for an event that will test your physical, and also to a degree, your mental endurance, the Tough Mudder is it.

But you and I are all part of the toughest event on this planet, in this life, our race to heaven. It's not easy. But when feet feel like lead and we think we can't run another step, when our hearts are as heavy as our legs and souls are ready to give up, then it's time to consider Jesus.

Are you tough enough for this race. By yourself, no. But you have the greatest teammate there is. You have Jesus. He's already completed the course, and now he's running with you. He makes you tough enough to keep running. And with him at our side, we will win. That's a guarantee. Amen.