

## **“Olympic-Style Faith: Perseverance”**

**Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; 45:1-15**

**Hebrews 12: 1-3**

**Matthew 15:21-28**

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“Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, **and let us run with perseverance** the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.” (Hebrews 12:1-3)

How about those Olympics? People are showing up at work bleary-eyed from staying up half the night watching the Olympics. It’s been truly exciting to watch the athletes compete and it’s been inspiring to hear some of their stories of making it to the Olympic Games in Beijing.

During the month of August we’ve been having a series of sermons based on Hebrews 12:1-3 and other scriptures called “Olympic-Style Faith”. The writer of Hebrews uses the metaphor of a race to help inspire his original readers and us in the Christian life. He reminds them and us that we have a cheering section as we run the race, he challenges us to keep our focus on Jesus and he tells us to persevere in faith and faithfulness. For the original readers and hearers of Hebrews, these words would have challenged them to remain faithful followers of Christ even amid persecution, suffering and the seemingly overwhelming challenges of being a Christian every day in every way.

Today we’re talking about **perseverance**—a quality that has become, I fear, increasingly lacking in our instant gratification, multi-choice, short attention span and “have it your way” culture. Here’s what the dictionary says about perseverance: “Perseverance is steady persistence in adhering to a course of action, a belief or a purpose; steadfastness, diligence, hard work.” The opposite of perseverance is apathy, laziness, indolence, lethargy.

All of the Olympic athletes we’ve been watching on TV know about perseverance. Here are few whose stories have particularly interested me.

“Getting to the Olympics is tough for anyone — imagine training in a country in the midst of 17 years of civil war and chaos, where militia men try to

prevent you from training. That's the case for 16-year-old Somali sprinter, Samiya Yusuf Omar. Battling her way up from poverty with a single mother, and facing pressure from friends and relatives who tell her that running will prevent her from marrying and from a better life, she's qualified to represent her country in Beijing.

Despite literal roadblocks that prevent her from going to practice, and when she does get to it, training at a track pocked with mortar holes, Samiya runs through all of the insults and warnings.

Samiya's mother was a national-level athlete before Samiya's father died. Now, Samiya says she is just proud to run for her flag.” (Citizen Sugar.com; BBC News “Against Odds: Samiya Yusuf Omar”). Perseverance.

“Eight years ago, Lopez Lomong didn't even have a country. Now he is not only competing in the Olympics but he was also chosen to carry the flag for his adopted nation, leading the U.S. Olympic team at opening ceremonies. The 1,500-meter track runner was the flag-bearer only 13 months after becoming a U.S. citizen.

He was born in Sudan, separated from his parents at the point of a gun at age 6, and with the help of friends, he escaped confinement and made it to a refugee camp in Kenya. Lopez Lomong came to America in 2001 as one of the Lost Boys of Sudan.

He knew nothing of the Olympics in 2000, when his friends at the refugee camp in Kenya talked him into running five miles and paying five shillings to watch Michael Johnson on a black-and-white TV set with a fuzzy screen. At that point, Lomong knew he wanted to be an Olympic runner. He earned his spot at the Olympic trials on July 6, exactly one year after he gained his U.S. citizenship. Perseverance. (*ESPN The Magazine*, Tom Ferry and “Former Lost Boy Lomong Chosen to Carry Flag,” copyright 2008, The Associated Press).

Every Olympic athlete could speak to us about perseverance. I believe every one could tell us that persevering when they are winning, injury free, financially backed and obstacle free is far easier than persevering under adverse circumstances. To persevere when you're losing, suffering pain, broke, made fun of, exhausted or even bored is far more difficult. It's the same when it comes to persevering in faith and faithfulness.

Today we heard part of the story of Joseph as it is recorded in Genesis. Talk about perseverance when things get tough. Joseph starts out as the favorite son of his father Jacob (and as the least favorite brother of his jealous siblings). Joseph goes from his favored position to being sold into slavery by his brothers. While in slavery he becomes a most-favored servant. Then, in another act of injustice

against him he is imprisoned on false charges. He is released from prison because of his God-given gift of interpreting dreams. He is chosen for a powerful leadership position in a foreign land and saves the lives of many, including the very brothers who sold him into slavery.

Joseph was a model of perseverance. When things were good, he was faithful to God. When things were bad, he was faithful to God. When he had **no** power he was faithful. When he had immense power, he was faithful. Joseph grew to understand what Paul would later speak so beautifully in Romans: “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces perseverance/endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

It’s certainly tough for us to persevere in faith and faithfulness at times—especially the times when we feel like a failure, when we’re injured emotionally spiritually or physically, when we’re broke, when people make fun of our God who lets terrible things happen to us and people around the world, when we’re tired, when things are chronically difficult, when faith doesn’t seem to “pay off” and even when we’re just bored with life and faith as we know it.

It’s hard to persevere in faith when we have failed—when we’ve sinned AGAIN. But I am so inspired when I watch the Olympic gymnasts after they fall. In the middle of a routine, one falls from the uneven bars. She gets up, composes herself and resumes her routine. I can’t imagine being able to do that.

The actress and singer Julie Andrews says: “Perseverance is failing 19 times and succeeding the 20<sup>th</sup>.” Basketball star Michael Jordan has said: “I’ve missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

It’s tough to persevere in faith when you’ve fallen down in sin. It’s easier to throw in the towel, continue in sin or just give up on any idea that you can ever be faithful. Yet, the challenge of the Christian faith is to seek forgiveness, get up off the mat and resume your life of seeking to be faithful.

It’s tough to be faithful when you’re injured and hurting or when you’re broke or when things are chronically difficult for you in your life. It’s easy to say “blessed be your name O Lord” when the sun is shining, when you’re well, when there’s enough money. It’s far more difficult to bless the name of the Lord when your circumstances are just the opposite.

It's tough to be faithful when you don't see immediate results or get bored. I think we get the idea that if we read the Bible, go to church, do good deeds, say a few prayers that we're going to be super-Christians right away. It's really as ludicrous to believe this as it is for a person to believe that if he runs one lap around the track he can immediately compete in the Olympics. To be a mature Christian requires perseverance in study, prayer, worship, and service. It's a lifelong training camp. Sometimes it's boring.

It's tough to persevere in faith when people around us don't seem to understand or even make fun of us. Some of us know the loneliness of being a Christian in a family where our faith is not understood or may even be made fun of. Some of you know the loneliness of coming to church by yourself. Some of you know what it's like to have to go against the wishes of a spouse or parent or child or a sibling to be active in church. Some of you know what it's like to be made fun of by friends who find your devotion to Christ pretty silly. Some of the Olympic athletes have endured this and worse for their devotion to a rigorous training schedule. They persevered. We are called to do the same.

It's difficult to persevere in prayer when the answers seem to be "no." It's difficult to persevere in prayer when our cries seem to be met with silence. Think of the Caananite woman about whom we read in Matthew. She cried out to Jesus for mercy. She cried out for her daughter to be healed. Silence. More asking—a "no." More pleading. A "Yes." She persevered.

To stay faithful when there is silence, to stay faithful when the answer is "no" or "not yet" takes perseverance. We like results—the more immediate the better. But living the Christian life . . . running this race of faith takes perseverance.

Where do we learn such perseverance? We certainly can look to the Olympic athletes. They have much to teach us. There are a host of others, as well. Look around you in this sanctuary. We don't know everyone's stories but you probably know someone's unless you're visiting with us today. (In that case, please think of someone you know.) Look around you and think about how these folks right here with you have weathered all manner of difficulties and have persevered in faith. Look around you and think about how these folks right here with you have overcome and are overcoming obstacles, remaining faithful and persevering as they run this race of faith.

Of course, we learn perseverance best from Christ. That's why we are to keep our eyes on Him. We are to go over his life and death story again and again and again. We are to remember his perseverance for our sakes. He has run this race

before us. He runs alongside us even now. He will greet us with open arms at the finish line.