

The. Finish Line



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Dedicated to my sister, Amanda, and my brother, Gayle. For all that you have experienced, and for all that you will continue to experience, you are stronger than you think. I admire your resilience. May you always wait on the Lord, renew your strength, mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint (Isa. 40:31).

My gratitude overflows to Debra Wright, for tirelessly working behind the scenes to make my two books a reality.

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PREFACE

I cannot even begin to tell you how many times in my years as a runner I've been asked, "Why?" Why do you enjoy running so much? Why do you have to train even when it's pouring rain, 90 degrees, or 10 below? Why would you want complete strangers to see you wearing ridiculous outfits that ride up and rub red marks on bare flesh? Sometimes people are too polite to ask, but I know that's what they're thinking by their raised eyebrows and confused lips.

Perhaps you too have been asked, "Why?" Why do you have to go to church so much? Why do you spend so much of your summer participating in various church-related activities? Why do you believe what you do? Maybe you can also sense that this is what people are thinking even when they don't ask.

Why do we do what we do? The answer to each of these questions is actually very similar.

- ✠ Because we serve a greater purpose, and we want to dedicate ourselves to training and being the best we can be.
- ✠ Because we understand that our eternal reward is much greater than anything here on earth.
- ✠ Because ultimately we don't care what these curious questioners think because we're surrounded by a group of fellow runners—Christians—who will encourage us along every step of the journey.

Whether you enjoy running or not, you are running in a race. But not just any race: the race of eternity. The race is not easy. In fact, there will be all sorts of pitfalls along the way. There will be opponents who discourage you, temptations that snarl you, and plenty of days when you feel so tired you want to quit. The race will feel more like a journey than a sprint. But if you learn to overcome these challenges, you will see that the pros of being a runner—a Christian runner—far outweigh the cons.

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From the time we decide to follow Christ, we must dedicate ourselves to staying faithful. The fruits we produce will determine our success in the race and our final outcome.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap (Gal. 6:7).

When you sow good works and fruits, you are running for the Lord. When you sow laziness and sin, you are running for Satan. Whose team are you on? Each chapter of this book will provide examples of what runners do to have the best race possible and what we can also do as spiritual runners to stay on the Lord's team.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it (1 Cor. 9:24).



The prize for our race is our salvation! So as Paul told the Corinthians, don't just be another person in the race; run in a way that you may win the prize!

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I wrote a poem in college that summarizes some of the main points of this book:

The Race of Life

To receive a home in heaven, live your life like it's
a race,
Have the patience of Jesus and always stay on pace.
At the start of the race, remove bulky clothing to
feel entirely light,
Be sure to take off the sins that may control a fight.
As you plant your feet to the ground, you'll hear the
Word and grow,
Do not become intimidated by any passing foe.
Compete not with enemies, for they don't
understand,
But rather, cheer them on and give them a
helping hand.
Your legs will support you most; you'll dig deeper
and stride further out,
While you become a servant and discover what the
Bible is all about.
When you begin to falter, your arms will serve
you more,
Along with fellow Christians, who support your
deserving score.
It will probably seem like the race is taking far
too long,
But you must endure to the end; your faith will keep
you strong.



Release unwanted air through the mouth; inhale
only oxygen you can use,
Gases like bad language, vulgarity, and criticism
will surely make you lose.
Be careful about what meets the eye,
Appearing to be winning ground; but it may just
be a lie.
Also avoid evil thoughts and think only focused and
straight;
Your mind, like the mouth and eyes, can surely
determine your fate.
As you near the finish line, you must never lose
control,
Instead you must stay fixed on the ultimate,
worthy goal.
Remember your Savior, who for you bore it all,
And then it will be easier for you not to fall.
If you run a hard race, without ever slowing down,
Then you are set for heaven, and you will win
your crown.

Please do not think that you need to be a runner in the physical sense to understand and appreciate this book. My hope is that, regardless of age, ladies can find encouragement in these pages. Some may be brand new Christians, some may be elders' and preachers' wives, and some may have never stepped foot in a church building, yet all of us share similar struggles; all of us could use a little pick-me-up occasionally.


Please also do not assume that I am a superior runner, much less a superior Christian. I run only two to three times a week, rarely placing in the top ten percent in races. And in my Christian race I face the same challenges as many other women. But I love running and I love God, and I have more than twenty-five years of experience in both areas. One of my main objectives for the book is to draw on those experiences to explain the many parallels between a physical


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race and our spiritual race. A few of the themes you will see throughout the book include:


1. The need for constant prayer and Bible study
2. Looking to Jesus for comfort and peace
3. Persevering through difficulties
4. Leaning on others for support and encouragement
5. Trusting in God to put you on the right path
6. Training for spiritual success beginning with the heart and mind, then showing the fruits of the spirit
7. The ultimate goal of heaven


If you would like, you may underline, highlight, or annotate each time you read about one of these themes. For example, you could mark passages denoting each theme with the corresponding number or use the following symbols:


Theme 1 — 


Theme 2 — 

Theme 3 — 

Theme 4 — 

Theme 5 — 

Theme 6 — 

Theme 7 — 

Additionally, you will find questions and challenges throughout each chapter that are intended to help you reflect on your own life and think about what kind of changes you can make to run your race more effectively. You may choose to read on your own or study with

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a group, but as the saying goes, “the more you put into it, the more you will get out of it.”

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to read or share this book. Now put on your running shoes, pin on your racing number, and stretch your muscles as we are about to begin the race of eternity.

Elizabeth Jimenez

START



RACE WITH THE RIGHT GEAR

When I first started running at the young age of twelve, I had no clue what I was doing. My feet pounded the pavement way too hard with each step and my arms flailed carelessly at my sides. I also wore baggy T-shirts, long cotton shorts, and whichever “tennis shoes” I laid eyes on first. All this did more to slow me down than help me. After a few weeks of painful heel blisters and uncomfortable chafing, I realized that running was not a sport that I could just show up for. I needed to be prepared with the right clothing, shoes, and gear to help me be successful.

As my running evolved, I started to buy more special gear. For example, anytime I needed new shoes, I understood that the process should not be rushed. I would search out each model of shoe, carefully examine the bottom tread, and even run a couple of laps around the try-on benches while the salespeople watched me curiously. Additionally, I replaced my wristwatch with a specially designed running stopwatch that could calculate time *and* distance! I even went from carrying no water bottle at all to investing in a water bottle belt and energy bars from a high-tech running store.

In the Christian race, as in a regular race, it’s important to be prepared with the right kind of gear. Our race resembles a battle,

and we need to be like soldiers, ready with the full armor of God described in Ephesians 6.

Read Ephesians 6:11–17. What does the armor of God consist of?

1. _____ (v. 14)
2. _____ (v. 14)
3. _____ (v. 15)
4. _____ (v. 16)
5. _____ (v. 17)
6. _____ (v. 17)

According to verses 11 and 13, why do we need to arm ourselves?

If we keep these six pieces of armor with us everywhere we go, we will be better equipped to sustain Satan's attacks.

Waist Girded with Truth

You may have a few pairs of pants that instantly feel baggy and bothersome if you forget to wear a belt. A belt prevents your pants from slipping and holds your clothes together. In the same way, truth holds us up and keeps us from slipping. If we don't follow that truth, or if we don't understand what the truth is, it will be much harder to keep our life tightly held together.

First, we learn what the truth is by studying God's Word.

And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free (John 8:32).

The truth of God's Word frees us from a world of sin and iniquity. Many of our friends, acquaintances, and even family members will try to persuade us to believe something we should not. For example, they may tell us that it's okay to skip church, that no one will know if we steal one small item, or that we can make it just fine without God in our life. Baloney!

Read John 8:44. According to this verse, who does not stand in the truth?

How else is Satan described in this verse?

Now read John 8:47. What is the contrast presented in this verse?

When it comes to the truth, we have two choices: we either follow Satan, the father of lies, or we follow God, the father of peace and justice. Notice that truth goes beyond the words we speak. We manifest our beliefs in our actions and lifestyle as well. Perhaps for you the choice is obvious, but there are several people close to us every day who are choosing the wrong path. It's up to us to continue in the truth and teach others the truth.

If a friend were to ask you tomorrow, "Why do you believe what you do? How can you know that you're doing things the right way?" what would you say?

If you were to meet someone who has decided for whatever reason not to believe in God at all who tries to convince you that there is no God, what would you say?

We must follow the path of our creator and stay grounded in the one and only truth.

Breastplate of Righteousness

Righteous is defined as “uprightness or morality; morally right or justifiable; acting in an upright, moral way; virtuous.”

When you hear the word *virtuous*, what comes to mind?

For me, *virtuous* means someone who is always doing the right thing without worrying about what others may think. Many of us have been raised learning about important virtues such as helpfulness, kindness, and forgiveness, and we understand how to be pleasing to God. Where we struggle, however, is following through with the right actions. We place too much emphasis on how others will react rather than thinking about how God will feel. If we are going to stay in the Christian race, we must put on the breastplate of righteousness with confidence and make good choices even when it seems like no one else does.

A poster hanging in my middle school read, “What’s popular isn’t always right, and what’s right isn’t always popular.” There will be many times during our Christian race when others may question our actions or make us feel uncomfortable. We must learn to shed our human nature about trying to please others by accepting two basic facts:

1. We will never please everyone.
2. The only ones necessary to please are God the Father and Jesus the Son.

Remember that “if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). If what we do is pleasing to God and Jesus, then our relationships with others will be more likely to fall into place, and our worries, doubts, and fears may be lighter.

Feet Shod with the Preparation Of the Gospel of Peace

Anytime I run after taking some time off, my feet feel soft and squishy and a sensation of peace settles over my entire body. The beauty of God’s creation all around also brings a sense of peace. In our Christian race, we should feel excited as our feet carry us to different points along the journey, and the peace that passes all understanding will help eliminate our anxieties.

In 1895, Alfred Nobel granted for his money to be awarded as a peace prize to someone “who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.”¹ Long before the prize was even created, Jesus was working diligently to bring peace between different groups of people. As Jesus’ modern-day disciples, we have a responsibility to continue the peacemaking efforts He started.

How can you be a peacemaker in today’s times?

1 “Facts on the Nobel Peace Prize,” accessed March 17, 2020, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/facts/facts-on-the-nobel-peace-prize/>.

What Bible character (besides Jesus) acted as a peacemaker, and how?

So, why feet? We have already talked about the importance of good running shoes, and Paul knew that the people in his day needed sandals that would survive the customary long walks necessary for daily tasks. Additionally, Paul wanted to remind his readers that they had already heard the message of the gospel, so they were prepared for the battle.

Finally, *gospel* means good news, and good news brings about a feeling of calm (or peace) in our lives. Now that we have heard the gospel, we can go out and share the good news—a peace offering—with others.

Being a peacemaker for Jesus involves controlling our actions (and our tongues) in dicey situations, turning the other cheek rather than lashing out when someone angers us, and showing the light of Jesus in all we say and do. As you run your race, remember to tread lightly over difficult territories with feet shod in peace.

Shield of Faith

Athletes must put a lot of faith in their coaches. They must trust that the coaches are trying to do what is best for the team, as well as individual members. Their job is to implement strategies and plans that will ultimately lead to victory. In our Christian race, our coach is Jesus. He has already run the race, and He knows what we are going through. What better person for us to put our faith in than that?

Read and complete the chart below about three instances in the gospels when Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well.”

WHO WAS THE PERSON?	WHY DID HE/SHE HAVE FAITH IN JESUS?	WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME?
Mark 5:25-34:		
Mark 10:46-52:		
Luke 17:11-19:		

Unlike the people you just read about who had faith that Jesus would heal them of their physical ailments, some of us may never experience a severe physical illness or disability. Some of us may need more faith in the day-to-day trials of life, like when there is conflict in our family, when we’re not able to find a job we enjoy, or when our

friends suddenly betray us. It's interesting to note that Jesus told the woman with the issue of blood to go in peace (Mark 5:34). Faith in God brings a life of peace and vice versa! Each part of the armor of God works like a team to protect and sustain us; the more we use one, the more we will benefit from the others.

At the same time, faith is not something that we can turn on when we have a problem and turn off when we don't. God does not want us to be like the lukewarm Laodiceans who were neither hot nor cold (Rev. 3:14-16). He wants us to fully rely on Him in all stages of life. Like the other parts of the spiritual armor, faith is a characteristic and an action that others should see shining through us no matter what. We cannot ignore God all year while things are going well and then suddenly expect Him to drop everything to attend to our needs when something goes awry.

How can you manifest a life of faith in your day-to-day words and actions?

No matter what the situation, believe and trust that God is there for you, He is in control of your life, and He has a plan for you. This faith will make it easier to keep running. It sustains us, not only when we are suffering or battling physical ailments, but also every second of every day!

Helmet of Salvation

A helmet protects an athlete's head from injury, concussion, and even brain damage. If an athlete doesn't have a helmet, he is asking for trouble. And if we as Christians don't have our helmet of salvation, then we could each face physical pain and suffering. We should cherish and protect this invisible helmet as if it were a precious jewel.

Contrary to popular belief, we must remember that salvation is a gift that we cannot earn. In fact, it comes through faith in Christ Jesus and obedient understanding of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15). Likewise, Jesus stated, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22; cf. 1 Sam. 13:14).

Why is it important for us to do all God’s will, rather than picking and choosing what we like to do?

To do the will of the Father means to follow the commands outlined in His Word. Read and write about these steps on the following lines:

👑 Romans 10:17: _____

👑 John 3:16: _____

👑 Acts 17:30: _____

👑 Romans 10:10: _____

👑 Acts 2:38: _____

👑 Titus 3:8: _____

Imagine that a beautiful woman approaches you and says she has something that will change your life forever. She hands you a small bottle containing a magical potion. “Just open it up,” she says, “and follow the instructions carefully. If you do, you can become immortal and never die.” What would you do? As ridiculous as this scenario sounds, it has been the plot of many Hollywood movies.

God has already given us a special gift—a magic potion of sorts—that is free: the gift of His grace and eternal life with Him and all the saints. Unfortunately, too many people don't realize that He's already given us this gift. They don't understand how amazing it is to accept the gift, and they certainly don't want to go through the trouble of following the instructions. Instead, they are running in the wrong direction, unable to see that they can live happily forever simply by following His commands. They have chosen the wide ways of the world: no work, no commitment, and no sacrifice, but an eternity of suffering later.

As you run your race, remember your ultimate purpose: you were created in God's image, and you are running to be united with Him one day in a setting more beautiful than you will ever see in any movie. Just as you would not go into a serious battle without your helmet, do not try to run your race without remembering what an amazing gift your salvation is.



Noah received an unprecedented command from God to build a giant ark. He could have whined and complained, made excuses, or simply refused to follow the order. Instead, he immediately started to prepare for the flood by working hard every day to follow the specific instructions, trusting in God to aid in his challenge. At times he may have doubted why he and his family worked so hard, with little or no support. But ultimately he understood that God's truth would prevail. The people around him may have criticized and mocked him, but he learned to ignore their behavior. He continued to do the right thing, recognizing that it didn't matter what those people thought, only what God thought.

Additionally, he must have followed the principle of having his feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace as he dealt with any doubters. Through it all, he relied on faith as his shield, never

giving up on his mission because he believed first and foremost in his heavenly Father. Finally, he understood salvation in that God chose to destroy the entire world for its wickedness, sparing only Noah and seven members of his family.

As you run your race, follow Noah's example and put on the full armor of God: the loins girded with truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which we will examine in chapter 2.



WINNING POINTS

In a physical race, there is only one winner and only one prize. But in the spiritual race, everyone who stays on the course and finishes faithfully will receive the same ultimate reward (2 Tim. 4:7-8; Rev. 22:12). How thrilling!



WARM-UP AND COOL-DOWN

When I ran high school track and cross-country, it was customary for the senior boys to lead the rest of the team on a warm-up jog and stretch routine. On one occasion, the boys foolishly decided to cut the jog short. Coach was furious.

“The warm-up is the most important part of your workout!” he yelled. “If you skip it, you will pay the price later! Since you thought it would be funny to take shortcuts, you’re all going to do it again and run double this time!”

Our coach wanted us to understand the importance of starting your race or workout with your muscles already warm. In our spiritual race, starting the day with a warm-up and ending the day with a cool-down will help prevent us from running cold or lukewarm. Instead, we will be on fire for the Lord! Bible study and prayer are two small acts that, if we practice them regularly, can keep our spiritual muscles warm, help us feel more prepared and excited about the race, and produce great gains.

Bible Study

In chapter 1 we studied about the first five pieces of the armor of God. The final part of the armor, the sword of the spirit, is in many ways the