

Baseball and the Bible: A Long Season

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Hebrews 12:1-3

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^[b] 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 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that we might have your compassion, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

If you talk to any baseball manager after a game in which he lost, you'll get this response, "Well, you know, it's a long season. Next week we'll do better." And if they won the game, they'll say, "Well, it's a long season anything can happen from here on out."

Baseball has a long season, and it is full of ups and downs and a grind, and you just keep moving forward day after day. I'm sure the players long for that day off that they get every once in a while.

The Major League Baseball season has 162 games, and now, of course, this year, it's been shortened to 60 games, and I just hope we make it through that many. But 162 games is a long season. In basketball, the NBA has 82 games, and the NFL has just 16. So, it is a long season.

What does that have to do with us? Well, our Scripture today has this phrase, "Let us run with perseverance the race set that is before us..." Perseverance. We don't really know who the author of Hebrews is, but we do know it's one of the later letters in the

New Testament. And the people have been waiting for Christ to return and to complete the kingdom of God and that it would come to pass in its fullness. And they had been waiting. As Tom Long, the great New Testament scholar and preacher, says, “One can stand on one’s tiptoes waiting for only so long.” And they grow weary.

That’s why the Scripture is clear about the purpose of the letter to the Hebrews, or at least one of them. He says, “...so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.”

Boy, I think that speaks to where we are right now as this Covid 19 pandemic continues, as the challenges around our country and around the world continue to be significant. We just get weary. And we lose heart - that’s a phrase that’s synonymous with to be discouraged. The word *courage* has as its central core, a word that in French means *heart*. To be *encouraged* is to gain heart, and to be *discouraged* is to lose heart. He does not want us to be discouraged or lose heart.

Let’s take a look at this Scripture and see how it helps us with perseverance through the long season. I want to sort of move around in the Scripture. I want to start with this phrase, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...” Then he moves on down and talks about Jesus. He says, “He endured the cross, disregarding its shame and endured such hostility against himself from sinners.”

It’s interesting; this perseverance is this sense of not quitting. You realize that it’s a long season. If you’re a young person, you’re so full of energy, and you want to start out fast, but you have to pace yourself because you know it’s a long season. And if you’re older, you think to yourself, “I want to finish strong. I’m tired and weary, but I want to finish strong. I’m going to push through that wall and just finish strong.”

Now one of the sisters or cousins of perseverance that’s really a part of it is this idea of resilience. If perseverance is not quitting then, resilience says, “When I fall, I get back up.” Isn’t that what resurrection really is in its most ultimate form? That Jesus got back up? After the cross, he got back up, he “endured the cross, disregarding its shame.”

One of the nice things about this series is that I get to read books about baseball, and I get to count them as work. That’s amazing! One of the classic books is called *It’s a Long Season*, and it’s by Jim Brosnan, who was a baseball player. He wrote one of the sort of inside baseball books about his season in 1959, and it was published in 1960. He talks about all the stuff that goes on in the clubhouse and behind the scenes.

Let me read to you a little piece of what he wrote in that 1960 book: “Each and every baseball season has its share of satisfactions and disillusionment, its thrills and despair...the professional life, moreover, grinds and polishes the emotions to a fine, hardcore - the professional spirit. A player who loves his craft has the patient determination to do the best job he can. The professional stores up, treasures that winning spirit, for there are many long days in the baseball year.”

Disappointments, despair, and somehow, there’s this sense of grinding through.

I like this phrase where it says, “The race that is set before us...” because what it says is that your life - the race that’s set before you - is going to have some challenges, some difficulties in it.

Let me tell you about Lucy Hone. I heard her speak not long ago, and I listened to her online. She’s from Christchurch in New Zealand, and she came to the United States and did her doctoral work here. She’s a psychologist who studies resilience. And when she finished that work, she went back to New Zealand to the city Christchurch. And soon after, there came the earthquake. It was so devastating and killed so many people - just devastated the city of Christchurch. So, she put that to work and helped people deal with the challenges of life, when you’re knocked down and how to be resilient and get back up. And she thought that’s maybe why she had studied it for that very reason. Then one day, her twelve-year-old daughter Abi was killed in a car crash. She said, “It became very personal to me. And no longer was it just me coaching other people how to be resilient. I had to learn to be resilient myself.” There’s no greater pain I don’t think than the loss of a child.

She sort of identified three habits of resilient people, and the first one is to realize very simply that there’s suffering in life. Let me read what she says: “Know that suffering is a part of life. This doesn’t mean resilient people go so far as to welcome it in - they are not delusional. However, when the tough times come, they seem to know that their suffering is part of every human existence. Knowing this stops you from feeling discriminated against when challenges arrive. After Abi died, never once did I find myself thinking, ‘Why me?’ In fact, I remember thinking, ‘Why not me? Terrible things happen to you just like they do to everyone else. This is your life now - time to sink or swim.’ The real tragedy is that not enough of us seem to know this any longer. We live in

an age where many of us feel entitled to perfect lives. Shiny, happy photos on Instagram are the norm when, as all of us know, the very opposite is true.”

The “race that is set before you” will have some suffering.

Now there are some people who believe that it’s all been laid out for you ahead of time, that it’s been pre-ordained. That the race set before you your life, your share of ups and downs, have been established ahead of time by God. Others believe that we have free will, and we make decisions, and those decisions lead to certain things. Others of us sometimes believe things just happen. Circumstances just happen. Whichever of those sort of philosophies you take, the truth is that they all come down to the place where you say, “There’s going to be suffering in my life.” In every season. There’s going to be some wonderful things, and there will be some bad things. It’s a long season, so just know that you can be resilient. That when the tough times come, you can get back up and move on forward. So that’s the first thing we can learn from that.

Let’s keep looking at the Scripture. Let’s look at verse one: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

One of the things I enjoy about going to Minute Maid Park is looking up to see the numbers of the jerseys that have been retired by the Astros players. Some of them I remember from watching, some of them I never really knew. For example, Jim Umbricht’s number is retired. He played only two years, and he played with the Colt .45s, the predecessor to the Astros, and he died of melanoma. But his death had a huge impact on the team as they bonded together. Or Don Wilson, whose number is retired. He was a great pitcher for the Astros in the 1960s and early 1970s. And he and his five-year-old son died from carbon monoxide poisoning in their home in 1975. It made such an impact on the team that they retired his jersey. Then there are the names of those we remember cheering for - like Jose Cruz, “Cruuzzz!” And then Mike Scott and Nolan Ryan and Larry Dierker and Jimmy Wynn and Jeff Bagwell and Craig Biggio. And all the teams have retired number 42 to honor Jackie Robinson. All of those who have gone before us and inspire the players. Can you imagine being a Major League player, and you put on a uniform for the very first time? You’ve made it to the show, and you walk out into Minute Maid Park, and you see the names of those who’ve gone before you. And you’re inspired.

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

One of the things that I do sometimes is walk out into the Memorial Garden just outside my office. That's the columbarium, and there are names there of people who have made such an impact on my life. Over on one side and very near one another are Durwood Fleming and Kenneth Shamblin, the first was the founding pastor of St. Luke's and the other was the one who followed. I never really knew them. Then also are my own mentors Dr. Walter Underwood and Dr. Jim Moore. Dr. Underwood is on a stone paver, and Dr. Moore has his marker there. I just think about what an impact that they made.

Then there are laypeople. There's Loyal and Exa Nelms in whose living room the idea, the dream for St. Luke's was born. There's Missy Bandy, who was the founder of Amazing Place. She was the first executive director of what at that time was called the Seniors Place - it's now called the Amazing Place. There's Carl Mueller, just a marvelous friend. And Dan Arnold, who was so generous. And Jerry Ritcheson, who made me laugh so much and just cared so much about Hospitality Apartments and invested so much of his life in that. And Jackie Greer, the amazing Jackie Greer who called every single visitor of St. Luke's for decades. And if I forgot to ask people to sign the little book, then I'd hear about it from Jackie Greer.

These are people who have carried this church forward. We're having our 75th anniversary this year, and we think back to those who have given of themselves.

One of the bummers about this summer has been that we've not had the Summer Olympics, and one of the neatest parts of the Summer Olympics is the carrying of the torch from Greece to wherever the games are to be held. One person carries it, then the next person carries it, and then the next carries it, and you can't break the chain. It's like someone's counting on you, ahead of you, and the people behind you are counting on you to carry their work forward. It isn't just that the cloud of witnesses behind us inspire us; it's that we don't have the luxury of deciding to quit because of all that they've given. We can't do that because of the sacrifices that they've made.

So maybe this athletic imagery doesn't speak to you. But I'll tell you this, that if you think about those who've gone before you in your life - the people who shared the Gospel with you, the people who loved you with all their hearts, the people who invested in you - you'll persevere because you don't want to let them down.

The passage says, “Since you are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely.” One of the reasons that we get weary is because we’re carrying all this baggage with us as we go. We’re just hauling along all the weight of sin and guilt and anger.

Rachel Fisher, one of our staff members in the Children’s Ministry area, has been teaching a class called “The Gospel According to Star Wars.”

Now I saw “Star Wars,” but I’m not a big aficionado on it. There have been so many of the films. But in number five, “The Empire Strikes Back,” there’s a scene where Yoda is with Luke Skywalker, and he’s trying to encourage him to keep going. Yoda’s actually on his back, talking to him. Here’s what he says as Luke is running: “Yes, a Jedi’s strength flows from the Force. But beware of the dark side. Anger, fear, aggression; the dark side of the Force are they. Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight. If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will...” Well, I think that may be overstating it. I don’t think it has to consume us forever. But I do think that we do have to be so careful about those things that we carry.

When I was reading that, I thought about our Pastor’s Bible Study after hours, where we’ve been studying the Letter to the Colossians. Here’s what Paul writes to them at the beginning of chapter three: “You must get rid of all such things - anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” (Colossians 3:8-10)

We have to take off those things - anger, malice, rage. There are so many things that we just carry along with us that we have to lay down.

Last week we talked about our failures and how striking out - we can carry the strikeouts, the failures on our shoulders if we want to. But it won’t help us. Marla Zucker is a sports psychologist in the Boston area, and she has a great phrase. She says, “Don’t stack your mistakes on your head, or they will weigh you down. Instead, put them under your feet as a platform so you can see your horizons.”

You can’t let your mistakes weigh you down.

Now the writer to Hebrews says, “Lay aside every sin and weight that cling so closely,” and I think the writer’s been intentionally vague there. Because the weights each of us carries, the baggage we carry, they’re all different. It might be guilt, or grief, anger, and resentment. Or it might be expectations of your parents that you’ve been trying to live up to them and you find you can’t. Even maybe after your parents have passed away. It might be a hurt you experienced a long, long time ago. Or it might be the expectations of others around you that you want to be well thought of and respected. You’re trying to live up to their expectations. Oh, there are so many things that can weigh you down.

But here’s what’s so interesting. I used to think that the way you did that was that you prayed, and then you just put it down. And that was it. You just lay it at the foot of the cross. And now I’ve come to believe that this idea of laying down of a weight is more like losing weight than it is just putting something down. It’s a discipline; it’s something you have to do every single day all the time. It isn’t a one-time thing, this putting things behind you. It’s a matter of a constant discipline of “let us lay aside every sin and the weight that clings so closely.”

Here’s the last component. He says, “Looking to Jesus, the pioneer, and perfecter of our faith.” There’s a term in baseball called the “yips” and what that means is that somehow a player who has been a great player, often it’s a pitcher, but it can be an infielder too. And they just can’t seem to throw the ball straight anymore. So, a pitcher will hurl the ball way over someone’s head, or down into the dirt - and not even come close. An infielder won’t be able to hit first base for the life of them. They say they’ve gotten the “yips”, so they’ll actually go see a sports psychologist. Then they’ll say, “I’ve got this mental block.”

There is a sportswriter who’s written a lot about this mythological yips and here’s what he says about it: “These guys are throwing the ball 50 feet off their mark, or they spike one halfway. I don’t even know how to describe it. Dr. Charlie Maher, the Indians sports psychologist, avoids using the term ‘yips.’ Instead, he refers to the circumstance as *misplaced focus*. That removes the notion that the ballplayer is suffering from some sort of daunting ailment.”

Yes, *misplaced focus*. The Scripture says, “Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” We find ourselves looking to so many other things, so many other agendas, so many other distractions that pull us away from following Jesus. Just simply seeking to live and love like he did.

One time I was asked to go to a church district meeting. I’d met some other pastors ahead of time, and we were all going to go to the meeting, and we were to go in a caravan of cars. It was out in a small country church, and I didn’t know how to get there. I said I’d follow someone else who was driving a black truck. So, I followed him as he drove the black truck, and we went down different highways. Then all of a sudden, he slowed down and turned into this country-western bar, a little honky-tonk off to the side. I stopped the car and got out, and I thought to myself, “What in the world is he doing? Certainly, we’re not meeting at this bar.” Then he got out of the truck, and it wasn’t him. It was another guy, and I’d been following for miles a different black truck. It was the wrong truck. Somewhere along the way, I’d lost my focus. I thought I was focused on the right thing, but I’d lost my focus and gotten distracted. I think that’s what we sometimes do. We lose touch with what really matters, of living and loving like Jesus.

When I think about Jesus and perseverance, what comes to my mind is 1 Corinthians 13. There he says, “Love never ends. Other things will pass away. Spiritual gifts will pass away, tongues will cease, prophecies will cease. But love never ends. Faith, hope, and love abide - remain, live on - but the greatest of these is love.” Jesus never stopped loving. He didn’t stop loving his disciples when they seemed too dense to understand what he was teaching. He didn’t stop loving when one of his disciples betrayed him. He didn’t stop loving when his favorite disciple - the one who was to lead the church - denied him three times in Caiaphas’ courtyard. He didn’t stop loving when the crowd turned against him. He didn’t stop loving when the soldiers flogged him. He didn’t stop loving when they put a crown of thorns around his head. Or spit on him. Or hit him with fists or mocked him. He didn’t stop loving when they executed him. That’s perseverance.

Jesus never stopped loving, and so neither should we. And if we can keep that as foremost in our minds with so many other things demanding and calling for our attention, we lose our focus. And at this time, when we’re so polarized, that we can remember we

can love the people with whom we disagree. When we feel relationships strained for whatever reason, we can love those people and never stop.

So, it's a long season. How can we persevere through it? First, we have to be resilient, to remember that there will be some bad games, some hard times. Second, we have to look behind us and look at all the cloud of witnesses that are there cheering us on. Those that we can't have the luxury of letting them down. We have to lay aside all of the junk that we carry, all the weight and the sin that clings to us so closely. And we have to keep our focus on Jesus, who never stopped loving. Neither should we.

Let's pray. *Gracious God, for some of us, it feels like we're at the beginning of the season. For others of us, it feels like we are in the last games. And yet at the same time for all of us, we can grow weary and be discouraged. So, God, help us keep our focus on your son Jesus Christ, putting down all of the weight we carry. Looking at Jesus and being inspired by those who have gone before so that we like you in your Son, Jesus Christ might never stop loving. Amen.*