

Coach House Church BEACONS

KEEP ON RUNNING

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It is always sad when someone passes away. For close family or friends the loss is felt the most, for more distant family or friends less so but there will still be a time of mourning or reflection. For most of the rest of us we might not even know someone has died, the only way of knowing is if we happen to see a report in the newspaper or perhaps, in this modern age, in a facebook post. The exception to this is when someone famous dies, then there will be reports on television news, probably accompanied by some form of obituary. We might feel a little sadness if the deceased person was someone we looked up to, like a pop star or actor but even so most of us will just note the fact and continue with our lives. The one time that we do take more note, and perhaps feel a little sadness, is when the person was in some way known to us. And this is the case for me with someone who died recently.

The man in question was Ron Hill. Ron was an athlete, a marathon runner, who represented Great Britain at Olympic games in 1964 and 1972 and also in the Commonwealth games 1970 where he won the gold medal. Ron was running in an era when athletes didn't generally make much money from sport or enjoy a particularly celebrity existence. As such Ron lived a fairly ordinary life outside of sport owning and managing a clothing company. Later in life Ron lived in Hyde, he continued running and used to get to and from events by train. This was how I knew Ron as he would often be on the same train as me going into Manchester, dressed in his running gear. We occasionally exchanged a few words and I knew Ron as a genuinely nice person who always had time to chat, hence I was a little bit sad to hear that he had died.

There is one particular fact about Ron that I want to consider today. Ron holds the record for the most number of consecutive days on which he ran at least a mile. This stands at 52 years and 39 days. Ron's dedication to his sport, and his belief in fitness kept him going even after a car crash and bunion surgery.

Now there are three occasions in the bible where the apostle Paul talks about running a race. Writing to the Corinthian Church Paul says "Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadow-boxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified"

The writer to the Hebrews said "Since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run the race God has set before us"

Another time Paul wrote about a race was when he wrote to the Galatian church. The Galatian church had been formed during Paul's first missionary journey when they had received the good news about Jesus gladly. Many in the church were originally Jews and by the time Paul wrote the letter they had been led astray and were teaching a few things wrongly. Paul cared passionately about the church and was writing to them in the hope that they would be able to correct the wrong teaching and get back on track. Paul wrote "You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth?"

Paul is likening our journey through life to a race. Because life is quite long it is best compared to the marathon race although in fairness, despite the length of a marathon, life lasts a lot longer. However we should take into consideration that training for a marathon is in itself a life changing commitment. As with any physical sport it involves getting up early and running along streets and lanes in the darkness and rain.

Paul is right to make this comparison because being a Christian involves being able to press on even when there is darkness all around us, and when circumstances make us want to give up and stay in bed.

Paul says that he "disciplines" himself. Elite athletes have psychological coaches who teach them how to persevere. As Christians we have Jesus. He is our "coach", He teaches us, by His word, how to keep going. How to serve Him day by day, how to resist the temptations when they come, how to walk closely with Him and how to pray. You see we aren't running alone. When an elite athlete is attempting to break a record they often have someone to run ahead of them at a set speed to help them to pace themselves correctly. Jesus is always ahead of us, pacing our way, at His speed, to keep us going at just the right pace. And by the way, He will never leave us behind.

At the end of his life Paul was writing to his friend Timothy, he said "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race and I have remained faithful"

Paul probably holds the record for the most number of consecutive days on which the Gospel was preached. He knew that he had done what God had asked of him, he knew that he had lived his life in the same way that he had exhorted other Christians to do. At the end of his life he was confident that he had trained hard enough to win the race, he was certain of the prize. There was no doubt in his mind about where he was going because he had done as he said and trained himself well.

Ron Hill holds a record that shows discipline and commitment for over 50 years but is, at the end of the day, only an earthly record. It has no relevance for eternity, but what it does is to help us to put into context the point that Paul was making.

We must treat our Christian walk as a race, we must train ourselves and discipline ourselves. We must do it day in day out, regardless of the circumstances or how we feel. We don't train for any earthly glory, our prize is to spend eternity with God and that is worth more than all the earthly prizes put together.



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