

As you run the race, beware of 'the bear'

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For more than a year, we've been engaged in a relentless, ongoing battle with the COVID-19 pandemic. All of us, no doubt, have grown a little battle weary along the way.

We now are in that questioning, confusing and frustrating stage of "mask fatigue," "social-distancing fatigue," "pros-and-cons-of-vaccine fatigue," and for those of you like me who have been teaching Sunday school virtually for more than a year, I'm sure you join me in suffering from a little case of "Zoom fatigue."

'The bear'

Back in my high school and college days of running track, we used to talk about a certain running phenomenon called "the bear." When a runner is making that final turn around the final lap of a long race, it's not unusual for this mysterious and menacing "bear" suddenly to appear and seemingly jump right onto the runner's back.

For the runner, the breathing starts to grow increasingly labored, the arms start to feel as if they're carrying 100-pound weights, the legs begin to stiffen, the back begins to arch backward, and every muscle in the body starts to tighten as the build-up of lactic acid in the bloodstream starts to take its toll.

The runner strains for every step. The finish line seems impossibly distant. It's almost as if a great big bear literally has run out on the track and jumped right on board.

We warned fellow runners: “Watch out for the bear. Look out for the bear. Don’t let the bear get you.” When you’re running a race, you always have to “beware of the bear.”

Run with perseverance

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV).

The author of Hebrews also cautions us to “beware of the bear” when it comes to running the race of life. This especially is true as we continue to run what’s now become a marathon of a pandemic.

There are spiritual bears looming all around us, all the time. Sometimes the bear takes the form of that “sin that so easily entangles.” It jumps on board, and we suddenly find ourselves growing stagnant in our spiritual race.

At other times, the bear jumps on in the form of circumstances that can overwhelm us easily. If we’re not careful, we can grow weary and begin to lose heart.

The burdens of life can become “bears” easily, and there’s not one of us in the midst of this pandemic who hasn’t had a run-in with one of these ugly emotional creatures that have leapt onto our track and onto our back.

Three training tools

What are we as struggling pandemic runners supposed to do? How do we run “with perseverance” without letting “the bear” jump on board? Three

training tools come to mind as we consider the exhortations of Hebrews 12.

1. We've got to stay holy. We've got to confess our sins daily, so those things "that hinder and the sin that so easily entangles" don't build up and start to weigh us down.

2. We've got to stay in shape spiritually. Physical runners usually succumb to "the bear" simply because they're not in their best physical condition. The same is true for spiritual runners, especially as a pandemic continues. The daily disciplines of prayer, Bible study, worship and fellowship are keys to keeping the bear off our track and off our back. It's absolutely the key to running the race "with perseverance."

3. We've got to keep our eyes on the prize continually, or as Hebrews puts it, "[fix] our eyes on Jesus." When we live with a fixed focus, we live with a fixed purpose. And that leads to a perseverance that will help us to finish the race successfully. Keeping our eyes on Jesus all the time is the best way to avert the bear attacks of life.

Beware of "the bear" in your life today. Don't let him loom; put him to his doom. Don't ever forget: There's a "great cloud of witnesses" looking down upon you to strengthen and encourage you as you run your race.

And don't ever forget: Someone is with you every step of the way in your race *this* day. Keep looking to him. Keep listening to him. Keep leaning on him. This pandemic will end one day. And he will get you through to the finish line.

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