

City Church Trevor Slide

On June 11, 1977, James Earl Ray, the man who shot Martin Luther King, Jr., escaped from Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary in East TN, about 150 miles from here.

51 ½ hours later, he was caught.

In 51 ½ hours, that's more than 2 days...he barely got a mile away from the prison.

That's how tough the terrain is.

...and 20 years after James Earl Ray was eaten alive by the rugged and East TN terrain, a man by the nickname of Lazarus Lake, better known as Laz, decided he needed to turn this terrain into a race. That's when the Barkley Marathons were born. Or as Laz calls it, "The Race That Eats Its Young".

But this isn't just any race.

Title slide- "God Does Not Enjoy Suffering: How the Gospel Gives the Power & Hope to Persevere"- Acts 27

There is no marked trail. No time chip. There is no online registration. It only costs \$1.65 and a License plate to register, but Laz only takes 35 runners every year. His application for the race includes questions like "What's your favorite parasite?"

The Barkley has a cumulative elevation that's twice the height of Mt. Everest. It has briars that slice your legs up like lamb at a Brazilian Steak House. There are sections of the course called Rat Jaw, Little Hell, Big Hell, Coffin Springs, and "The Bad Thing".

The course is 20 miles long. But to complete the race...you have to run through it 5 times. That's 100 miles, some of which is basically mountain climbing.

There is exactly one water station. You are allowed to bring only a flashlight, a map and a compass.

One year, a guy almost finished the race, but on the final lap he literally went crazy from sleep deprivation and fatigue. They found him in a riverbed just talking to himself and squishing mud in between his toes.

Laz intentionally puts signs up in the race to point runners in the wrong direction. So much of the race is just random. Like the start time. The whole thing starts whenever Laz feels like blowing the Conch shell. Sometimes it starts at 5 am, sometimes he starts it at noon.

When you quit...as most people do. Laz breaks out his bugle and plays Taps... you know, like at military funerals.

Meanwhile, Laz sits back at the start-slash-finish line in a lawn chair smoking cigarettes and laughing at the stories of pain happening out on the trail.

In 30 years, only 20 runners have ever finished the race.

Its a course designed to make its runners suffer.

And its creator, Laz, loves to watch them fail.

When you get your bib for the race, there is a different phrase on it every year just underneath your number. Here's a couple of examples.

"Suffering without a point."

"Not all pain is gain."

There are only 2 public trails that intersect the course. But Laz does everything he can to prevent the runners from seeing other people while they are running.

"Even just the sight of other human beings is a kind of aid. We want them to feel the full weight of their aloneness."- Lazarus Lake

This is a course designed by a sadist. Its meant to make its runners suffer alone, and without purpose.

For some of you, your life, right now, feels like the Barkley Marathons. ...and sadly, you believe God...if he's there at all...is exactly like Lazarus Lake.

Designing a course for life that is suffering without purpose. Randomness meant to confuse you and to make you quit. So he can laugh and play taps as you bow out.

I can tell you from experience, sometimes life does feel like the Barkley Marathons.

I can also tell you from experience, God is NEVER...EVER...like Lazarus Lake.

But today, I want God himself to show you both of those truths...that he completely acknowledges the reality of your suffering...at the same time, there is not an ounce of it that is purposeless...or a second of it that he wants you to feel the full weight of your aloneness.

I'll give context to this in a minute- so lets jump right in.

Acts 27:1, 3b-4, 7-11, 14-15, 18-44, 28:1-6
with some descriptive verses removed- see all the (...))

When it was decided that we were to sail to Italy, they handed over Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion named Julius, of the Imperial Regiment. ... And Julius treated Paul kindly and allowed him to go to his friends to receive their care. When we had put out to sea from there, we sailed along the northern coast of Cyprus because the winds were against us.

v 7-11

Sailing slowly for many days, with difficulty we arrived off Cnidus. Since the wind did not allow us to approach it, we sailed along the south side of Crete off Salmone. 8 With still more difficulty we sailed along the coast and came to a place called Fair Havens near the city of Lasea.

9 By now much time had passed, and the voyage was already dangerous. Since the Day of Atonement was already over, Paul gave his advice 10 and told them, "Men, I can see that this voyage is headed toward disaster and heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship but also of our lives." 11 But the centurion paid attention to the captain and the owner of the ship rather than to what Paul said....

v 14-15

... But before long, a fierce wind called the "northeaster" rushed down from the island. 15 Since the ship was caught and unable to head into the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along.

v 18-20

Because we were being severely battered by the storm, they began to jettison the cargo the next day. 19 On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 For many days neither sun nor stars appeared, and the severe storm kept raging. Finally all hope was fading that we would be saved.

v21-36

21 Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, "You men should have followed my advice not to sail from Crete and sustain this damage and loss. 22 Now I urge you to take courage, because there will be no loss of any of your lives, but only of the ship. 23 For last night an angel of the God I belong to and serve stood by me 24 and said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul. It is necessary for you to appear before Caesar. And indeed, God has graciously given you all those who are sailing with you.' 25 So take courage, men, because I believe God that it will be just the way it was told to me. 26 But we have to run aground on some island.

v27-38

27 When the fourteenth night came, we were drifting in the Adriatic Sea, and about midnight the sailors thought they were approaching land. 28 They took soundings and found it to be a hundred twenty feet deep; when they had sailed a little farther and sounded again, they found it to be ninety feet deep. 29 Then, fearing we might run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight to come. 30 Some sailors tried to escape from the ship; they had let down the skiff into the sea, pretending that they were going to put out anchors from the bow. 31 Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." 32 Then the soldiers cut the ropes holding the skiff and let it drop away.

33 When it was about daylight, Paul urged them all to take food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been waiting and going without food, having eaten nothing. 34 So I urge you to take some food. For this is for your survival, since none of you will lose a hair from your head." 35 After he said these things and had taken some bread, he gave thanks to God in the presence of all of them, and after he broke it, he began to eat. 36 They all were encouraged and took food themselves. 37 In all there were 276 of us on the ship. 38 When they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing the grain overboard into the sea.

v 39-44

39 When daylight came, they did not recognize the land but sighted a bay with a beach. They planned to run the ship ashore if they could. 40 After cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and headed for the beach. 41 But they struck a sandbar and ran the ship aground. The bow jammed fast and remained immovable, while the stern began to break up by the pounding of the waves. 42 The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners so that no one could swim away and escape. 43 But the centurion kept them from carrying out their plan because he wanted to save Paul, and so he ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. 44 The rest were to follow, some on planks and some on debris from the ship. In this way, everyone safely reached the shore.

Acts 28:1-6

Once safely ashore, we then learned that the island was called Malta. 2 The local people showed us extraordinary kindness. They lit a fire and took us all in, since it was raining and cold. 3 As Paul gathered a bundle of brushwood and put it on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. 4 When the local people saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "This man, no doubt, is a murderer. Even though he has escaped the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." 5 But he shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 They expected that he would begin to swell up or suddenly drop dead. After they waited a long time and saw nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

Transition: Have you ever heard of someone having wave after wave after wave of utter misfortune like this? I mean Paul is arrested, then shipped out for a trial with a bunch of prisoners. Then they run into storms, run out of food and have to go Gluten Free all at the same time. It all ends up with a shipwreck on a rainy and cold island where Paul is then bitten by a snake.

This is like Paul and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day...except in Paul's life it happens over the course of several years...not just one day.

So here's where we're going.

Today, from the events of Paul's life that culminate in this final and eventually fatal trip to Rome, I want you to see and believe that the only thing Lazarus Lake and God have in common, is that they both blow a horn when your suffering ends.

After that, they are pretty much complete opposites.

Here's how.

1) God doesn't love random pain. He orders the universe to turn every ounce of suffering into good.

- Let me summarize what happened in Paul's life to get us to this shipwreck we read today.
- **Acts 21**
- Paul is arrested....then beaten.
- **Acts 22-**
- Paul tells the people who have arrested and beaten him about how Jesus changed him and wants to change them too.
- Then, they stretch him out on a torture machine to whip him again...until he brings up the fact that he's a Roman citizen.
- Which is kind of like telling the bullies in your school that your dad is the principal.
- **Acts 23-**
- He's taken before a Jewish council and he tells them more about Jesus. The council argues with each other until they are ready to kill Paul.
- **Acts 23:11**
- But Jesus appears to Paul and says-
- "Take Courage. For just like you told the people here in Jerusalem about me. You're going to make it alive to Rome...and do the same thing there."
- **Acts 24**

- Paul appears before a governor named Felix. Felix can't figure out why everybody is so angry at Paul...but he also doesn't want to release him. So he just sort of puts him on house arrest for a couple of years and invites him over for dinner with his Drusilla several times...where Paul kept sharing the gospel of Jesus with them.
- **Acts 25**
- Felix is replaced by a guy name Festus as the Roman governor over Jerusalem.
- Meanwhile, the angry Jewish mob keeps trying to figure out a way to kill Paul, by bringing all of these charges against him and how everywhere he goes he makes people angry because he keeps saying this stuff about how Jesus died and resurrected.
- But before Paul can be tried and killed in Jerusalem...he "appeals to Caesar". As a Roman citizen by birth, he can do that at any time. Essentially, this is bypassing all the courts to go directly to the Supreme Court.
- Its also an all expense paid trip to Rome...on Caesar's dime.
- And what do you think Paul is doing the whole time?
- You guessed it. Telling people about Jesus.
- This becomes really evident in Acts 25 when Felix calls in the Jewish King Agrippa...because he thought Agrippa would understand all this Jesus stuff that Paul was talking about.
- After Paul shares about Jesus with Agrippa...we have one of my favorite lines in all the Bible.
- **Acts 26:28-29**
- Agrippa looks at Paul and says, "Are you trying to persuade me to be a Xian right now?" And Paul says... "Right now, later, whenever it happens... ..and not just you...every single person that can hear my voice."
- Then Agrippa says, "Well, I don't see why should you die. I think you should go free. Problem is...you already appealed to Caesar. So now you gotta to go to Rome."
- And that leads us to Acts 27, When Paul is put aboard this Prison ship headed for Rome.

- Now, lets jump to the end of this whole thing.
- I mean its been angry mob after angry mob. Death threat after death threat. Imprisonment after imprisonment. Then shipwreck and starvation. FINALLY, Paul gets free...finds these nice Maltese natives on Gilligan's Island and then...
- A VIPER BITES HIM.
- If ever there has been anyone who can look at God and say "Cmon MAN!" its Paul with a viper hanging from his hand.
- Now, Paul's response is incredible. He just shakes it off and says, "Cool".
- But look what the island natives say.
- **Acts 28:4, 6**
- At first they look at him and think, "Anybody who has this much bad luck, well, the gods must have it out for you. You must have done something REALLY bad."
- Then they just sit around and wait for him to fall over and die.
 - I've always wondered what Paul was doing while they were waiting for him to die. Was he cooking dinner? Sitting in a hammock? Journaling? That had to be weird.
- But then they completely change their story when Paul doesn't die. Now, he looks invincible to them. So they think, "Wow. You survived this...you must be a god!"
- And right here on the Island of Malta in first century AD, is most people's view of suffering.
- On one hand, when repeated suffering comes into our life we tend to think, "Oh no, what have I done. God must be punishing me."
- We think, "What have I done to deserve this?"
- And if we can't find a reason...we chalk it up to a random and mean God who isn't paying any attention to us.
- On the other hand, if we survive it and come out of the other side, we tend to wear our suffering and survival as a badge of honor.
- Like a "26.2" sticker on the back of your SUV.
- "I survived the Barkley Marathons"

- At that point, we're absolutely sure of what we deserve.
- Our endurance and perseverance is evidence of our supreme god-like willpower, or toughness, or just overall goodness. And because I've been to hell and back, I deserve your compliments, your respect and your worship.
- But see, that's not really the way suffering works.
- All suffering isn't a direct result of your own sin.
- And NO suffering is reason for you to boast or feel entitled.
- In the middle of all these terrible events in Paul's life...there is a consistent theme.
- He always seizes the moment to talk about Jesus.
- Whether its to the people who are about to kill him, the sailors he almost dies with or the Kings and Governors he's on trial in front of, Paul uses every bit of suffering to share the gospel.
- Here's the thing. Suffering always gives you audience. The only question is what are you gonna say when the natives are watching you, waiting for you to die?
- Paul talked about Jesus' death and resurrection. He shared his personal testimony about how Jesus had changed his life, turned him around.
- ...and it changed peoples lives.
- Look at this letter Paul wrote to the Philippian church while he was in prison.
- **Phil 1:12-14**
- He tells the Philippians not to be concerned about his imprisonment, because it has given him, quite literally a captive audience to talk to about Jesus...the guards! And then he says, as others hear of his suffering, they are starting to share the gospel with more and more people. By seeing his weakness, they are becoming bold.
- A few years ago- I got this email out of the blue.

- **In 2009 my wife (before she was my wife) was a college student at UNC. She didn't know Jesus and was living (more or less) a typical, godless college lifestyle that was starting to really implode. And as things were going from bad to worse, a friend invited her to the Summit Church...particularly the college ministry you were leading at the time. Long story short...it wasn't long before your love for Jesus and faithful teaching actually led her to the Lord...and she was saved. During this time...(even after coming to Christ)...she was still dating a non-Christian guy, and apparently you and Keva had them over to your house once for dinner to "get to know them." Shortly after that they experienced a very, very painful break up...but your and Keva's vulnerability about the failure of your own marriage, suffering, and trusting God was a game-changer for her at that time. She had never seen anyone (or walked alongside someone, even from a distance) that applied such grace and mercy to life in the areas that matter most. And that forever changed her.**
- I need you to know something about that email.
- I thought my wife and I had failed the night she and her then boyfriend came over for dinner.
- See, I thought that night that I was going to share the gospel with her boyfriend, and win him over with my smooth talking and Socratic arguing.
- I thought nothing changed that night.

Back to 1)

- But what I didn't know was that it wasn't my clever teaching that really impressed anybody. It was sharing about the hardest 6 months of my life. It was my wife opening up about her sin...and me being honest about my weakness and pain and the way God was faithful in the middle of it all...that's what impacted her.
- See, in your suffering, God is given you an incredible gift. He is given you the open ears of people who normally wouldn't pay attention to what you have to say.

- You know, its tragic when we look back on all the things we thought were our greatest successes and realize so much of it was wasted time. Kind of like running a pointless race that's only meant to make you suffer.
- But...Its funny....sometimes when you look back at the things you thought were colossal failures...the way you never would have drawn it up...those things turn out to be the most important things you ever did.
- But God doesn't just want you to HOPE he does something good with your suffering. He wants you to KNOW that he is.
- And that's why he makes promises.
- All through these chapters of chaos in Paul's life in Acts, somehow, God keeps reminding Paul about what he's doing.
- **23:11**
- After Paul is arrested and it looks like he's going to die in Jerusalem, Jesus appears to him and says, "You're gonna make it to Rome!"
- **27:25**
- Then, when the ship is about to go down, Paul looks at all the frightened sailors and he says like Christ said to him, "Take heart, I have FAITH that God is going to do EXACTLY what he said."
- **26:16 & 18**
- And don't forget. Paul's whole conversion started with a promise that God was going to use Paul to bring people to trust Jesus.
- But those aren't even the most significant promises for Paul.
- In fact, it's the very thing that he preaches to save others that is also the message that sustains him...the gospel.
- **26:23**
- See as Paul is preaching the gospel to everyone else, he's also preaching it to himself.
- The gospel says that Jesus suffered and died, but then he rose from the dead.

- Notice how Paul puts it here when he is talking to Festus and Agrippa.
- He calls Jesus, "The FIRST to rise from the dead."
- You know what that means, right?
- It means that all through Paul's suffering and imminent death, he's hanging to this promise that he's going to follow in Jesus' resurrection.
- Think about what that does to you in suffering.
- I'll tell you what it does.
- **ILLUS:** I used to be very hung up on sports, during games I would go way over the top. And then by necessity, I began having to record the games...and watch them later. But I could never wait to find out who won. So I'd look at the score.
- When I would watch the game and I knew my team won, I would almost get a little excited when they started losing by a ton of points...because I knew there was an epic comeback on the way.
- When I didn't know what the score was, I would have yelled and screamed and pitched a fit and told my whole household why it so stupid to be a Redskins fan...but when I knew what the outcome was, I would say, "Keva, boys...get in here...you're gonna want to see this."
- Paul knows he's going to resurrect, because the gospel promises that all those who trust Jesus for their salvation are going to follow him in his resurrection. So when Paul is suffering, imprisoned, shipwrecked, snake bitten...seemingly about to die, either in person in front of Maltese natives, or by the letters recorded in your bible, he's inviting millions of people... "Hey...get in here....you're gonna want to see this!"

Back to 1)

- None of that's possible if life is just a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.
- But God is better than Lazarus Lake.
- You don't have to make sense of your suffering by labeling it punishment or by turning it into a badge of honor.
- In fact, you don't have to make sense of your suffering at all.

- Because in Jesus' death and resurrection, God already has.
- You have the same promise that fueled Paul. That Jesus is the first to rise from the dead...and no matter what comes at you...your suffering will be used to tell that story...and then you'll rise too.
- **27:25**
- So Take heart...for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as you've been told.
- When Jesus resurrected...we saw the final score...so when we fall behind now...it just means the comeback is gonna be that much more epic.

Transition: But don't make the mistake of doing it alone....See, in the Barkley Marathons...

2) God doesn't isolate his runners. He's with you in the darkest valley & so is his church.

- One of the most memorized passages in the Bible is the 23rd Psalm.
- And one of the most memorable lines of that Psalm is in the 4th verse.
- **Psalm 23:4**
- **Even when I go through the darkest valley,**
- **I fear no danger,**
- **for you are with me;**
- **your rod and your staff — they comfort me**
- **Now, here's the question.**
- Exactly HOW is God with you darkest valley.
- Unfortunately, most of us read this as a "me and God" verse.
- You know, coffee cup, open Bible, quiet time kind of thing.
- While its absolutely true that God comforts us individually...
- The most common way God comforts us in our suffering is not in isolation...its through other people.

Back to 2)

- From Acts 20-28, Paul is prayed for and encouraged by the Ephesian elders, then some disciples go with him on his journey. All along his trip...where he is being threatened and mocked...he takes refuge in the homes of Xian brothers and sisters.
- But God is so sovereign, so good, that he even uses people who don't believe what Paul believes to comfort and care for Paul.
- There is Felix and Festus and Agrippa.
- All who could kill Paul with just a word, but God causes them to see Paul in a favorable light, Felix even has Paul over for dinner several times.
- **27:1 & 3**
- There is a Roman Centurion named Julius who takes care of Paul... and actually saves his life when they shipwreck and the other soldiers want to kill all the prisoners.
- **28:2**
- Then there are the Maltese natives.
- Who take care of Paul after the shipwreck.
- **28:7**
- there is also a guy named Publius...who started an expensive grocery store chain...who opened up his home and fed and cared for Paul 3 days.
- But as soon as Paul gets to Rome...
- **28:14-15**
- he meets up with Xian brothers there...and take a look...he meets them at the "Three Taverns" or as I call it, the Leaky Cauldron and its when he sees these brothers that he thanks God and takes courage.
- And lets not forget...that this whole sequence is written in the 1st person plural. You know what that means?
- It means that through a big part of Paul's journey and suffering, the author of the Book of Acts, Luke, is right by Paul's side.
- Remember what Lazarus Lake said?
- **"Even just the sight of other human beings is a kind of aid. We want them to feel the full weight of their aloneness."- Lazarus Lake**

- God does not want you to feel the full weight of your aloneness. He wants you to feel the full weight of his presence. He wants you to never be alone.
- Jesus promised that as you take the gospel into the world, that he is with you always...even to the end of the world.
- So I want to ask you something...
- Why in God's name...literally...why in GODS name do you think the best way to "do church" is to sneak in the back of the sanctuary late and get out to your car before the service ends?
- Do you actually believe that its better to keep people out of your life than it is to let people in?
- I know...its hard. You don't have time for a community group. But if the primary way that you are going to take courage in the LORD during your suffering is through the presence of other believers... maybe you should reconsider.
- The church is not a building you go into on Sunday. It's a people on a journey with you. When we keep each other out, we are keeping the rod and the staff with which God comforts us out as well.

Back to 2)

- **Weekender- Nov 7-**
-
- **community Groups.**
- Point of the Community Groups is not for more information- its to grow relationships that you can encourage and help one another follow Jesus- especially in suffering.

Serving with people.- You deepen when you are on mission together and you go through suffering

- God's plan is never for you to be alone. And he always provides through people. So don't Lazarus Lake yourself as you're running the Barkley. There's a better way to walk through the darkest valley.

Transition: Besides, Lazarus Lake is a hypocrite....because he could never finish the Barkley Marathons himself.

3) God didn't just design the race, he ran it & won it for you.

- Lazarus lake tried 3 times and failed to ever complete the Barkley Marathons.
- Which means he's inviting participants to run a race that he can't do himself.
- So many people get angry at God for the suffering they go through. Like God is just a sadist who likes to watch people suffer.
- But see, suffering didn't come into the world because God likes it. Suffering came into the world because God loves us.
- See, love is only love when its chosen.
- That's why God gives you the free will, to love him and worship him...or to disown him.
- And its in that rejection that things fall apart.
- Literally, when Adam and Eve rejected God...suffering began. Pain began. Death began.
- ...and so did an impossible race to try and free ourselves from it.
- A race that everyone fails...because we all die.
- ...and, like Adam and Eve, we all sin too.
- We all fall short of the glory of God.
- Before we can ever finish our race...in fact, really before we ever begin it...we bow out. We sin.
- But the God who loves us so much, even though we quit the race... he comes down...he puts on the runners bib that says "Suffering without purpose"...he puts on your number...and he takes a dose of his own medicine.
- But the thing is...its not really his medicine...its yours.
- On the cross, Jesus was not only physically torn apart like the runners who climb up "Rat's Jaw" ridge...he was spiritually and relationally ripped apart from God the Father.
- On the cross, Jesus cried, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me."

- See he was feeling the weight of total and complete aloneness, a cosmic separation from God the father...so that you could forever feel the weight of God's presence in your life.
- You know, in the Barkley Marathons you have to do 5 loops. And every time you come around to the start line again for another loop, there is equal parts ***temptation to quit*** and ***motivation to keep going***.
- There is a temptation to quit because Laz is there. And he's got chicken wings on the grill. And he's sitting back in his lawn chair reminding you of how pointless it is to try and finish. He's reminding you of the weight of your aloneness out of the trail.
- But...also when you make the loop, you'll find the people who came along with you to support you. The people who sent you off on the journey are also cheering you on...to finish strong. They are reminding you that you really aren't alone...and that at the end of the race...they'll be waiting to go home with you.

Hebrews 11:32-40

32 And what more can I say? Time is too short for me to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, 33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received their dead, raised to life again. Other people were tortured, not accepting release, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36 Others experienced mockings and scourgings, as well as bonds and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they died by the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. 38 The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and on mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

39 All these were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect without us.

- **Hebrews 12:1-2**

- **Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us,**
- **2 keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**
- This says that now, knowing Christ has died in our place and resurrected...now we have a great cloud of witnesses...that's the church...from Abraham to Paul to the girl in your community group... we have this great cloud of witnesses that continues to testify what they have seen Christ do. They are telling you not to quit. Not to give in to the weight of your sin...or the temptation to believe you are alone.
- **And equipped with that faithful testimony, we can run the race successfully.**
- Not because we've figured it out, but because we know Jesus not only created the race...he finished it for us. See...that's what those witnesses...that cheering section tells you. That's what they are witnesses to.
- So lift your head up...the race that looks impossible has already been finished for you. Now you don't have to quit. Because no matter how slow you limp across the finish line... You come out with the gold medal.
- So let me ask you. When suffering comes...can you run with endurance? Do you have the promise and the people in your life to lay aside every weight...and all the sin that clings so closely...so that you will be one of the cloud of witnesses...that for eternity will testify to this faithful God that never left your weary soul alone?

Invite to Prayer Counselors & Altar & Baptism.