Garber Field. Essexville, Michigan. Every May at the end of the school year. All the Lutheran grade schools in the area have a track and field day there. Days before the event takes place, students are out at gym time, running short distances, practicing broad jump, throwing a softball. I still remember the year, my daughter Carolyn was in the 440 yard dash. Her mother and I were at the finish line. Carolyn started out the race well, in 1st place ahead of several other girls in her age group. Her mother and I were cheering wildly. Come on Carolyn, you can do it! As she was approaching the finish line, her knee dislocated. She managed to cross the finish line, not in 1st place but 8th place. She began crying because of the pain. We managed to pop her knee back into place, and console her with hugs. Life on this earth is kind of like the day Carolyn had at Garber field. It is a race. A blue sky race. A race where there is pain. A race where we get weary. A race where we cry. A race that requires perseverance. Perseverance means holding out under stress. Not slowing down or stopping. A race where we do cross the finish line. In fact, our God wants to meet us at the finish line so badly that he puts us through some pretty intense conditioning to get us there with our faith intact.

Why do we run this race? We do not run this race to earn a place in heaven. We run this race because heaven is already ours. There is even a crowd cheering us on, a great cloud of witnesses, the heroes of faith who have run the race before us. Included in this crowd are names like Abraham, Moses, Sarah, Paul, Sandy Hahn, Donna Reed, Jerry Taylor, Bob Mathias, and Doug Hartshorn, people we love who have run the race before us. This great cloud of witnesses keeps cheering us on and telling us it is all worth it. They keep reminding us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we run this race. They keep reminding that all the training and agony that goes with running this race is worth every minute because we are able to bring glory to Jesus and his work for our salvation.

When the runners line up for the race, they take off their warm up jackets and warm up pants to run the race with as little clothing as possible. Don’t want any unnecessary weight to slow you down. If we want to run our race for Jesus, we cannot allow ourselves to become entangled by sin. It can trip us up. Look what happened to Judas. “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.” Ephesians 4:22 tells us “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off the old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.” How can I run this race for Jesus if I don’t take off the sinful ways of the past and get rid of them? One of the greatest runners who went before us, the Apostle Paul, told us how tough it would be to throw off the sin that so easily entangles, when he wrote, “For I have a desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-this I keep on doing.”

How can we run this race with sin stuck to our shorts and tank top? We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector 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.” Fix your eyes on Jesus and examine what he did. Christ looked at his options and saw that he had two; pain or no pain; shame or no shame; death or no death. Beyond all comprehension he chose pain, shame and death. Why? Because he looked beyond all those horrible things and he saw joy. The joy of saving you. The joy of forgiving your sins. The joy of giving you eternal life. And that
joy coupled with his never-ending love for all people was enough to lead him right to the cross to pay for the sins of the world.

But don’t stop there. Don’t take your eyes off of Jesus just yet. In fact, don’t ever take your eyes off of him because he is still doing stuff. He is sitting at the right hand of God right now, as we speak, and he is ruling over everything. He is in charge, he has command, nothing happens without his knowledge and approval. He is the decider. Now put these two things together. The Son of God who loves you more than anything else in all the world is in charge of your life. That ought to make you feel good. That ought to make you feel safe.

As you run this race you also look forward to what is coming in the future. When you finally come home to heaven, you can picture it like entering a huge stadium with millions of spectators cheering. Weary from your last days on earth, worn down with cares, you look up at their smiling faces and realize they’re all cheering for you! There in the middle of the stadium is the One who made it all possible. You’ve never seen Him before, but you know Him and love Him because of the scars on his hands that are held out to welcome you to glory. Jesus paid the price with His blood. He wants you to be forever with Him and the Father and the Holy Spirit in the lasting joys of heaven.

Will this race be easy for you and me? You know the answer to that question. Imagine running a race in front of a hostile crowd. Instead of being cheered, you are jeered. Rotten eggs and rotten tomatoes are thrown at you. People spit on you and curse you as you pass by. And I ask you what is worse? Is it the verbal abuse or the subtle disdain? They may not tell you verbally that they don’t like the way you are running your race to honor Jesus, but you know what they are thinking. Then think of Jesus. We are told, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grew weary and lose heart.” Jesus said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” All these great saints of the past, the heroes of faith, the cloud of witnesses, people we love who died in the arms of Jesus, they keep telling us that Jesus faced opposition and came out on top, He’ll make sure we do too.

These great heroes of the past also had their struggles with sin. They cheer us on and tell us not to get discouraged when the Lord disciplines and trains us to run a better race for our Savior. We are told, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

The Greek word used here for struggle is the word, “agonizo” from which we get our English word agony. When Jesus prayed in the Garden his agony was so great his sweat fell to the ground as great drops of blood. There is a book and a movie about the life of the artist Michelangelo called, “The Agony and the Ecstasy.” It describes in detail how hard it was to create in fresco, wet colored plaster, the beautiful Sistine Chapel. There was the agony of painting the ceiling over a period of 25 years. Then there was the ecstasy or joy of seeing the finished product. It stands today as one of the greatest works of art ever produced by a human being. Your life on this earth is like a painting that glorifies God, and each brush stroke comes with this agonizing struggle against this sin that so easily entangles us. But eventually, we experience the ecstasy of the finished product. A believer, who is perfect and without flaws, with Jesus in heaven.

If the great saints of the past would have a word to speak to us today, they would cheer us on and tell us not to be worried about the way the Lord will train us in the school of hard knocks. The hardest part of this race is not the mountains we have to climb, but
the sand that gets in our shoes. So we are told, “And you have forgotten that word of
courage that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s
discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those
he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

What is discipline? It is training that is necessary to lead a child to maturity. It
involves both instruction and correction. Sometimes such discipline comes from the
hand of God. Other times it may come from the hands of the enemy, as for those Hebrew
Christians. But God always sends or bends such discipline for the well-being of his
children. How shall we react to it? First of all, Do not make light of it. When God
disciplines, indifference is not a suitable response. God may be saying something
important that his children can hear better when shivering in the storm than when basking
in the sunshine. To make light of God’s discipline might be to miss the message. So as
Christians, we want to ask ourselves, what are you teaching me here Lord. How are you
attempting to mature me in my walk with you.

Secondly, when we face discipline, we are not to lose heart. God never forsakes
his own. When he tests, he toughens us. However heavy the discipline, his grace will
cover. As it says in I Corinthians 10:13 “God is faithful, he will not let you be tempted
beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so
that you can stand up under it.”

The right reaction to God’s discipline is confidence in God’s love. Those whom
he loves he disciplines. Sometimes that may even include flogging with the whip or lash
as the Word “punish” indicates. Proper training involves both instruction in the way to
go and correction when behavior is wayward. We may resent it at first, but later we shall
understand what our Heavenly Father was attempting to do. This father has a love which
cannot fail and a wisdom which cannot err.

This discipline we receive is worth it because of the harvest of righteousness that
comes forth in our lives. So what harvest will God produce in you through his loving
discipline? When you face sickness he will increase your longing for heaven and your
trust in his grace. When you have fights and struggles in your marriage and in your
family, he will use it to center your family on him and find forgiveness and peace. When
you experience loss in your life, of job or money or possessions, he will use that trial to
increase you reliance on him and to grow in thankfulness. And when you experience
isolation and loneliness, he will use it to bring you closer to him. God can and will do all
these things for us as we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. It’s
time now for us to start running again. Run Forrest Run! Run Your Race With
Perseverance! Run Your Race For Jesus. Amen.