

## My Journey to 26.2 Miles

*Running is a lonely sport*

I've been a runner for 30 years now. Over the years running has been a very time efficient way for me to keep in shape. You can feel very alone, however, when you run. In many cases this sense of being alone has helped clear my thoughts as I have contemplated God in a sunrise or the smell of flowers around me. At other times I am just reminded how physically alone we all are.

I've always toyed with the idea of running a marathon, but would typically discount the idea because of the commitment and pain required to get there. Early last summer for some reason the running felt very easy and I started to seriously consider a marathon. I rationalized that I was about to turn 45 and realized I may not have many years left to try for it. As I look back I now believe that God wanted to use this as an opportunity to teach me a few things.

In the late summer I started to prepare for the formal training. My goal was to be able to easily run 6 miles before the serious training began. This mileage is much easier to do in October than in August! I would come in from these runs pale and dehydrated. With such a long distance there are many things to learn so I decided to check into a local running club that helps prepare people for the marathon. I had looked up their website a few weeks before and they were running about the same distance I was, so I got up at 5 AM on a Saturday morning to go run with them. Right before I left the house I looked again at their website to get directions and noticed the distance they were running – it was 3 miles further than I was running! With the high humidity I knew I wouldn't be able to keep up. At that moment I felt God literally speak to me inside my mind, "**You are to do this alone.**" I have felt God's presence before and his prompting but never an actual message. Feeling more than a bit unsure about what was to happen, I did my normal Saturday run. I realized that this quest was to somehow become significant for me.

Starting in mid September I started the formal training and it was hard. I would get up early on weekdays in order to insure I could get my run in, and the long-distance Saturday runs started. As the mileage increased these Saturday runs became harder and harder. As the mileage increased I started to feel as if wild beasts were pursuing me as the fatigue and pain became significant. Sometimes they would only grab at my ankles; at other times it felt as if they had ripped my throat out. On any given day I didn't know what it would be like so I was always a little anxious before I started. Even when these long runs were very hard, I heard a voice in my head saying, "**You will not quit.**" At times it became emotional as I struggled to keep going. Finally the weather started to cool off and I approached my first marathon warm-up race – a 15.5 miler downtown.

Even though it was November the day of the race was hot and humid. I finished but the last 5 miles I was hurting very badly in the legs and was badly dehydrated. This dehydration caused massive cramping and soreness in my legs the next day, which happened to be a moving day at work. While hobbling up some stairs that Monday morning I felt something "give" in my right quadricep, and later that day got extremely stiff in the back. I was bent over so bad with back pain that I looked like an old man and could not run that week due to the pain. The following week I tried again to run, but could not go past a mile due to back pain.

After 3 weeks my back was a bit better but time was running out - I was falling far behind in my training. The worst moment was early one Thursday morning when I went out to try and run 6 miles. I got halfway, 3 miles away from home, and I had to stop due to back spasms. I walked back home in the darkness, watching others runners pass me by. By the time I got home Julie was awake and could see I was upset. I told her I thought it was over. So much effort, and so much pain had gone to waste. I couldn't believe it. I also couldn't understand why God would let me get injured. I felt God for some reason wanted me to do this thing and yet here I was sidelined. I felt alone more than I ever had.

Julie had been suggesting I call a massage therapist and in desperation I picked one at random and made an appointment for that Saturday. The therapist gave me a good massage but what she said was far more important. I apparently was not drinking enough water during the day, and was badly dehydrated even before I started to run. She recommended that I drink 70 oz of water each day. I had nothing to lose so I followed her advice that day. The next day was the make or break test – if I could not run 12 miles it was all over because I had fallen so far behind in my training. I was amazed to find I was able to run the distance, and it was much easier than before. At the time I only felt relief. Looking back I doubt I could have run a marathon with my limited water intake during the day. I had family and friends praying for me the whole time. The end result of my injury was to force me to seek help, and I believe God led me to her for help on this quest.

Well the training began anew and the miles started to further increase. The “beasts” were still out there and each Saturday run was still accompanied by some anxiety. I knew I had fallen behind in my training and would have to train even harder to catch up. With the multi-hour long runs I also began to acutely feel very alone again. I would see other people training but in many cases they ran with someone. For some reason God wanted me to do this by myself. And still, every few minutes I heard this voice in my head saying, “*You will not quit.*”

The last four weeks my anxiety gradually started to increase. I had this big event looming in the very near future. I knew it would be painful, and I also knew for some reason it would be significant. During this time I started to consider how Jesus felt the last few weeks of his life. He knew he had the cross looming in his future, and he was bound to feel so alone even among his friends. He also knew He could not quit if it was His Father's will for Him to go through this.

The night before my 20-mile run, which is the longest of the training runs, I was a little nervous as usual. That Saturday I woke up at 5:30 as usual to prepare for the run. When I went to get my running stuff, I saw a new high-tech running shirt and a new IPOD as an early Christmas gift. As I ran that morning I listened to some of my favorite music that my daughter had downloaded. During this run I got emotional at times as I realized how much time it must have taken her to download all the songs. At times I also would laugh, as when “Don't Worry, Be Happy” played while I ran mile 16. It also struck me forcibly how much different my journey was compared to Jesus'; during His last few weeks He continued to love those around Him but received little in return. For my journey I was surrounded by family and friends that loved, supported me, and were praying for me.

This love and support became even more apparent the night before the marathon. I was trying to stay calm, knowing what lay in front of me. That evening Julie threw me a surprise pasta party, and many friends came over to the house to help me carbo-load! After dinner they all prayed for me. What a comparison to Gethsemane, when His closest friends couldn't even stay awake.

The big day finally arrived. I awoke at 4 AM to begin preparations. A dear friend arrived at 5:30 to go with my family to help support me. Before I knew it, the gun went off and the race started.

At the race start I felt determined but for some reason physically I did not feel right. All morning I had felt very tight and no amount of stretching helped. As I crossed the 10 mile mark I saw more friends who had taken time from their Sunday morning to cheer me on. At mile 16 I saw my family and friends yelling for me. It was very encouraging, but at this point I knew something was very wrong with my right leg. However, I just smiled as I ran by and hoped for the best.

Somewhere just after mile 18, as we were approaching loop 610 to get on Memorial, the pain increased to a terrible level. I could not bend my right leg, and even walking was very painful. I jogged stiff-legged kind of like a young Forest Gump, stopping when I couldn't run further, which at the end was every 30 yards or so. With over 8 miles to go, I realized I was to experience a little of my own "Via Dolorosa". Like Christ I was to travel a distance in great distress. But again, God showed me the differences between His experience and what I was going through. Instead of people spitting on me and beating me, I had people yelling my name in encouragement, showing that I was not alone in this.

Analytically I still can't believe how I got through those last 8 miles. I was in a haze of pain. I found myself talking to other runners and I felt their concern for me as they could see how I was hurting. At one point a young girl from a first-aid tent ran after me to see if she could help. I knew only stopping would help, so I thanked her and hobbled along. Even though I was hurting I felt God's love for me through the actions of people around me. In my head I could still hear the voice saying over and over, "***You will not quit***".

The last 400 yards or so the crowd really started yelling and I managed some sort of jog to the finish line. I saw my family and friends who had stayed to yell for me as I finished, even though I was way behind my expected time. I put my arms up in the traditional finish, but felt a little numb about the experience. Fortunately with the crowd's encouragement, in particular friends and family, I was able to experience joy at achieving the goal God helped me accomplish.

A month later I have discovered I did indeed strain some tendons in my right leg. Nothing that some physical therapy and weight training can't fix, however. I took a break from running but have started back recently. I now tend to get a bit emotional when I run. After I run a few miles and get tired, I flashback to those last eight miles on Memorial. Even though I felt great pain, I also felt God's love in all the people showing their support and encouragement, and His presence in the voice that said "***You will not quit***". In my mind I will always see Jesus telling that to Himself over and over as He carried the cross.

I started this quest in order to accomplish a life goal, but God showed up in the middle of it, and the journey to 26.2 miles was much more than I imagined it would be. As I look back on the past six months many things come to mind. Most important, however are two things:

- In a unique way God has shown how He loves me, and has helped me better understand His sacrifice for me.
- With God's grace I am a marathoner. Very cool, that.

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