

Article: The Long Haul

How often does any one thing make a big difference in a person's life? Little things are always making little differences. But big things that make big differences are few and far between. Most big differences are accumulations of little differences.

A major crisis is rare. If crises were happening constantly, there would be too much history to write. Actual turning points for people or groups of people occur seldom enough that they can be isolated and analysed.

Crisis are critical. But they are not the whole story. Short steps cover long miles. Many little turns outweigh spectacular events. Most important work is dull. Progress occurs inch by inch.

In Christianity, conversion is important. But perseverance is just as important. "*By your endurance, you will gain your lives*" said Jesus (Luke 21:19). We commemorate birth, but once born we need daily bread. We remember baptism, the washing of regeneration (John 3:5; Titus 3:5). But having been born again, we need the Word of God and the Lord's Supper frequently to nourish spiritual life.

The Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. For some people, it may be a short dash to the finish line (a deathbed convert, the penitent thief on the cross, the Christian child the heavenly Father takes home). But for most of us, endurance is more important than speed. "*The race is not to the swift*" (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

The Christian life is a war, not a battle. It is more than one fight or confrontation that is soon done. It is a long series of battles, some large, many small. All are mortal combat.

A soldier's last battle is no less frightful than his first. It may be news to some people, but the struggle with the devil, the world, and the flesh does not get easier. It often gets harder and more complicated, like the long-distance runner's battle with fatigue.

The old Adam in us should, as Luther's Small Catechism says, "be drowned and die" through daily application of Law and Gospel. But as someone said about the old Adam, "That guy can swim!" A lifeguard will tell of the strength and violence of a drowning man.

Many young Christians are idealistic. Their spiritual energy seems as boundless as their physical energy. They have yet to face prolonged trial, trouble, tribulation, and temptation. Some fall away when the going gets tough ("*which for a while believe*" Luke 8:13).

But are we not supposed to grow better and stronger in our faith? Should that not be part of maturity? Well, yes, but many Christians feel worse and weaker as they grow older or some severe temptation grows longer. They are not weaker, only wearier like the long-distance runner approaching the end of the race. The last mile, the last lap, is the hardest.

The middle of the race is hard enough. Many a believer wonders how he can go on. The weariness is not evil. Some coaches say about workouts, "No pain, no gain." There is some truth to that. The work that wears a person out is necessary if he is to be built up. But it must be combined with proper nourishment. Spiritual exercise does not make us stronger. It puts to use the strength we received from Word and Sacrament. It also teaches us the uselessness of any other supposed source of strength.

Veterans of the cross may have more, not fewer, spiritual aches and pains. They may carry many scars from many wounds. Total healing is not here but there! Health is in heaven. Old soldiers are not worse soldiers; they are no less brave and loyal for all they suffer. They are closer to the heavenly retirement, which God knows when to grant. We shall not be overstressed (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The point is to keep the eyes of faith fixed on the heavenly goal. The only way to do that is through the Gospel, the message of full pardon and free forgiveness of all our sins because of the life and death of God's Son, Jesus Christ, in our place. Because of Jesus, we are assured of crossing the finish line, winning the war, and going to heaven.

That is not at all because of our efforts. That is entirely because of Christ's efforts on our behalf. When the angels usher us into glory, we shall know why we had to face such wearying warfare, such agony of endurance (Acts 14:22). We shall know then, better than ever, that our salvation is entirely God's doing. Yet we shall not regret the fear and trembling along the way (Philippians 2:12-13).