

Even if you're not in the kind of physical shape to tackle one of these challenges, you might consider a different sort of endurance test. It's called the Christian life, or the way of discipleship. Today's reading offers a course description of the obstacles and challenges followers of Jesus face. In fact, these are the hurdles and hitches that Jesus himself overcame in order to finish well. His followers must be willing to take on the same challenges that the unbelieving world will throw in front of them.

The writer asserts that Jesus presents a kind of obstacle to unbelievers. Jesus is the "living stone, rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight," a "cornerstone" that the builders rejected (vv. 4, 6). To those who believe, Jesus is the precious foundation on which faith is built, but to others he is "a stone that makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall" (v. 8). They stumble over the "Jesus obstacle" because they disobey his word and fail to see him as the cornerstone of the whole creation.

Because the world stumbles over the Jesus obstacle, they will see his followers as problems as well. Peter writes to the young churches dispersed around the Roman Empire in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia who find themselves at odds with the social norms of their pagan neighbors and experience persecution as a result (1:1). When the Roman world came up against these fledgling Christian communities, they saw them as obstacles to be removed rather than trying to understand their challenging new worldview. In his book, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado cites some of the significant ways the culture saw Christians as "different, odd, and even objectionable."

First, *Christians refused to honor the Roman gods* upon whom the pagans believed the social and political order of the empire depended. Followers of Jesus had no images of their God, no altars or sacrifices, no temples or shrines, and (at least at that point) no priesthood. As such, they were not considered to be a "religion" and, in fact, many Romans considered them to be atheists. A failure to honor the gods of Rome could bring disaster on the empire, and claiming a crucified man as a king who had been raised from the dead seemed to be not only foolish but a dangerous notion.

Second, *they were a "bookish" people who read sacred texts in their gatherings*, which included men and women of different social classes as well as slaves all gathered together as equals. In the Roman world, religious texts were only read by priests to an elite few. The circulation of these texts meant that the movement grew even as it challenged the class structure of the Empire.

Third, *the early church challenged the social behaviors* of the Roman world. Whereas Romans often exposed unwanted babies to the elements leaving them to die, Christians raised their own children and even adopted some of those who were rejected by their neighbors. Whereas women were expected to be faithful in marriage, men could have multiple partners. Christians insisted that both women and men should be faithful in monogamous, lifelong marriage. While Romans enjoyed the blood sport of the gladiator arena, it was the Christians who refused to play along. Indeed, many would die in the arena themselves as a result.

To be a Christian in the Roman world meant running a tough course and having a hard climb ahead. We can argue that it's no different today in a culture that pushes us to worship the gods of consumerism, wealth, and violence; that values what is new and novel over that which is ancient truth; and whose social norms are those of the sexual revolution rather than Scripture.

The fascinating thing, however, is that the early church grew exponentially in spite of these obstacles. It wasn't because of their excellent preaching or attractive worship (things we value today), but because of their patient suffering amid persecution. Many pagans, observing these early believers maintain their faith and their virtue in the face of terrible suffering, wanted to know how and why they did it. They were attracted to people who didn't play by the world's rules and who seemed to have a greater kingdom in mind.

For Peter, this was the real finish line for the Christian life, the goal to which every follower of Jesus should aspire with his or her life. "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (v. 12). For Peter, living as good citizens and enduring suffering for the faith was the key to attracting others and introducing them to Jesus. Lest that sound too harsh for modern ears, Peter reminds us that Jesus himself endured similar circumstances. And Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:7, Jesus himself had "taken the form of a slave" when he became human and yet endured through the obstacles of suffering thrown in his way.

*He was tempted* as we are to follow the social norms as the path of least resistance, but "he committed no sin" (v. 22).

*He spoke the truth.* Rather than bend his truth to sound better to the itching ears of the culture, "no deceit was found in his mouth" (v. 22).

*He did not use violence.* When he was abused, he did not return that abuse (v. 23). In fact, he was silent except to seek forgiveness for his persecutors. That's a lesson we can learn in a day when social media all but begs us to retaliate!

*He did not use threats.* When he suffered, even on the cross, he did not threaten people with his wrath, but rather relied on God's justice to set things right (v. 23).

Jesus showed us that running the race isn't about staying on the sidelines, bypassing obstacles or retaliating against those who malign us, but about running with perseverance knowing the ultimate goal. For Jesus, that goal was saving the very world that crucified him. For his followers, it is doing our best to join him in that race.

But Jesus isn't just an example to us in his suffering. Through his own perseverance on the cross and then his rising from the dead, he enables us to run the race without carrying the heavy rucksack of sin. When we wander off course, Jesus acts more like a shepherd than a drill sergeant, for he is the "guardian of our souls" (v. 25).

In a world that is increasingly hostile to people of faith, it takes a certain amount of guts to want to engage in the obstacle course of discipleship: think of it as the GO-CHRIST Challenge. It would be easy to quit, to forgo the obstacles or to merely stand on the sidelines. Peter, however, urges us to run with boldness, being patient in suffering and being an example to others in our conduct. Jesus navigated these obstacles all the way to the end and ended on top of the world at the right hand of God. He urges us to follow his example, to lean into the hard stuff, and to keep our eyes on the finish line!

Prayer: Enduring God, grant us the willingness of a "Tough Mudder" to wade into the muck of this world. Give us the stamina of a "Spartan" to run the race to the finish. Help us to "race for our lives," not being distracted by the monsters of the world. Foster in us the discipline to work with others for the betterment of all people. Mold us, for we would be disciples of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

#### Sources:

- "11 great obstacle course races: Choose the best race for you!" bodybuilding.com. July 11, 2012. Retrieved November 19, 2016.
- Hurtado, Larry. *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016.

# The GO-CHRIST Challenge

**Sunday, May 7, 2017**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**1 Peter 2:19-25**

Springtime! The sun shines, the flowers bloom, the birds chirp, and the people reappear after a long winter's sleep. Right here in Fergus Falls there are more people out on the streets and trails. As a City, we've just finished the 30-Day Bike Challenge, and there are now a half-dozen new walking tours of the city. But a lot of folks are heading into the great outdoors to challenge themselves with a tough hike or a long run after a winter of being cooped up inside.

The "Tough Mudder" draws thousands of people for its weekend-long events around the country, and its obstacles require as much mind power as muscle strength to get over them. It's all about teamwork and community with the goal being *simply* to get through the course rather than be the first to finish. Oh, and you'll get muddy everywhere.

The "Spartan" features a variety of challenges, from the "easier" Spartan Sprint - a 3.2-mile race over rough terrain where participants face unexpected obstacles without a map - to the Spartan Beast, a 10-plus-mile course that only 50% percent of participants finish.

The "Run for Your Lives" race adds a touch of drama: racers run and climb over obstacles and dodge "zombies" who try to steal the three "health flags" that runners wear. Racers must cross the finish line with at least one flag to be counted among the living and be eligible for prizes.

The GORUCK Challenge brings the best of the military into the civilian world. Teams of 30 people, all wearing weighted rucksacks, engage in 8 to 10-hour "tours" where a barking "drill sergeant" orders them through a variety of physical/mental challenges that require teamwork and stamina.

Simply surviving these courses would seem to be a worthy goal for anyone who lines up at the start. To do so, you need to train your body and your mind, and it always helps to have a few friends to give you a hand along the way.