

THE FINAL LAP

NAVIGATING THE TRANSITIONS
OF LATER LIFE

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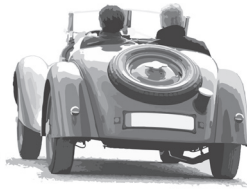
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INTRODUCTION:

THE MARATHON

‘Life’s a marathon not a sprint’ – how often have you heard that familiar phrase? But as I reflect back on my life, having just celebrated my 70th birthday, the idea that life is like a long-distance race makes a lot more sense to me now than it used to. Certainly I’m in the 20-something mile of my own marathon, and those final laps are coming into view.

I’ve never actually run a marathon (10K was the best I could do), but I have some idea of what it must be like. Any long-distance run has different stages – the initial enthusiasm, the grinding uphill sections, the boring bits, that glorious downhill stretch when you feel as though you could run for ever. And every marathon runner needs to plan ahead for the final stages of the race. How are they going to survive if and when they ‘hit the

wall'? Experienced runners have told me that the final mile or so can be one of the most difficult and perilous parts of a marathon. And so runners plan ahead. They have their strategy to keep going through those last challenging phases of the race; conserving energy, keeping fluid intake up, having a snack ready for a final calorie boost.

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote, '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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God' (Heb. 12:1-2).

We need to persevere if we are going to finish life well. Like long-distance runners, we need to prepare for the stages that still lie ahead. That's what this short book is all about. How can I prepare now for the final stages of the race? What are the challenges and opportunities that will come as I see the finish line drawing nearer?

Many of us have already run dark and dangerous sections in our race. We've already been through

the valley David describes in Psalm 23, and we know that the race ahead of us will probably throw even more challenges our way. But each one of us has an individual course marked out for us. We don't choose our own path, we are given it. What's more, we're not alone. It's a group race. We are all in this together and we are here to encourage one another, to strengthen one another, to support and even carry one another along when we need to.

There's a great crowd of unseen witnesses all around us, watching us and cheering us on. How many millions of faithful Christian believers have run this race before us? We are not alone. But as the competitors enter the stadium for the final lap they are not taking a break and waving at the crowds. Their eyes are fixed on the course that's marked out for them. Hebrews tells us that we also need to fix our eyes on the one who has already completed the course: Jesus, the 'pioneer and perfecter' of the entire race. He was the one who both created the course, and the one who then ran it from beginning to end, showing us the way.

So if you, like me, have already been running for many miles, if you're hitting the wall or if the final lap and the finishing line are starting to loom, then

this book is for you. We are going to be looking at three major transitions that are likely to happen in the later stages of the race. First, the transition from paid employment to what is laughingly called 'retirement', second the transition from independent living to dependence on others for our care needs, and finally the transition from living to dying, as we approach the finishing line itself.