

RISE AND JOG

Some years ago, while jogging one evening around my regular neighborhood circuit, I began to feel tired. Coming up not far ahead was a side-street cutoff that would put me back home in a hot shower straightaway. “Lord,” I complained out loud, “do I have to run the full circuit tonight?”

“No, you don’t have to.” Clear and matter-of-fact, the simple words entered my mind.

Sighing in relief, I turned toward the shortcut corner with a self-satisfied smile--and was drawn up abruptly by three added words:

“You get to.”

Startled, I slowed my pace. Sighing again—this time in dismay—I tossed out a prayer of thanks. As I turned back to the full-circuit path, I flashed on a plate of lima beans, and a boyhood voice admonishing, “The starving people in the world would be happy to eat that!” Right.

A year later found me sitting on an orthopedist’s table with a badly aching right knee. The bottom line: either no-guarantees surgery or no more jogging. Whether by faith or fear—it’s a fine line sometimes—I chose to throw away my running shoes. Tough call for an old Peace Corps Volunteer who began running on Nigerian bush paths 35 years earlier in canvas Keds.

Just a few months ago, after five years of surrendering, praying, stationary cycling and more recently, fast walking, I began to sense the Father telling me it was OK to jog again. Halleluiahs sprang forth in my spirit—followed immediately by hesitation. Was that really God’s voice, or just my own magical thinking?

I waited several weeks and the sense persisted. Hesitantly, almost secretively, I began shopping for new running shoes. With a glance over my shoulder, I bought a pair that fit well for my flat feet with orthotics--and hid them in the back of my closet.

And then, one bright and crisp afternoon in February, I knelt beside a dirt path near home, lacing up my new jogging shoes. And then, tentatively, I was stepping ahead, then walking, now faster, loping gingerly, and with a deep breath, finally lifting my knees and the wind patting me on the back and the tall bush leaves high-fiving me alongside and the tree branches hailing me in the breeze and my arms raised in praise and my voice crying out Halleluiah to the Living God! My Father, my Savior, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! I was jogging, again!

What a Daddy I got!

Can I have another helping of lima beans—please?

This story is not about the rewards of striving harder—plenty of people have suffered more and worked harder than me and never been restored--but rather, about the blessing of freedom God has given us in Jesus. It’s about our true and gracious Father, Who “wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son” (Ephes. 1:6 *The Message*)—and the Father of Lies, who steals the joy in those gifts by distorting them as rather obligations, duties, and religious tasks.

Some Christians, for example, believe “You have to speak in tongues or you’re not a real Christian.” For those who use religion to cover their shame, it’s about who’s a real Christian; for those who long to be saved from the awful consequences of their sin and the world’s wounding, it’s about who’s the real God. In the Trinity, Jesus is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. If Jesus is in your heart, then the Holy Spirit with this, His supernatural gift, is also within you, awaiting only your willingness to open it.

We don't have to speak in tongues. We get to. When we don't know how to pray, when our natural human intelligence and sensitivity has brought us to a dead end, when the Enemy is closing in and we have no idea what to do, we can break out in *super*-natural prayer that circumvents our human limitation and takes us right to our Almighty Father's heart.

Under New Covenant grace, that is--as Argentine pastor/author Juan Carlos Ortiz has noted--God's commandments become promises. When we listen to Jesus, we no longer hear a Lawmaker's edict: "Thou shalt not do that or you die," but rather, a Father's open-arms invitation: "Doing that will harm you, and your human willpower is not sufficient to stop yourself from doing it. Please, surrender to me. Let me put my Spirit within you, and I promise you—you won't do it" (see Ezek. 36:27; Philip. 2:13; Ephes. 3:20, Rom. 12:2).

Ah, but will the Son of Man find faith on earth when He comes (Lk. 18:8)? No doubt, He'll find plenty of religion: people striving to cover their shame by trying harder, to reap blessings by "applying biblical principles" and the like—ultimately, hopelessly, fabricating the fruit of the Spirit with dramatic "love," happy-face "joy," tolerant "peace," simmering "patience," overweening "kindness," wimpy "goodness," name-it-claim-it "faithfulness," self-righteous "humility," and teeth-gritting "self control." If anything blasphemes the Holy Spirit, it's this kind of working to manifest His fruits.

"Answer this question," as Paul challenged an earlier generation of equally misled Christians: "Does the God who lavishly provides you with his own presence, his Holy Spirit, working things in your lives you could never do for yourselves, does he do these things because of your strenuous moral striving or because you trust him to do them in you?" (Gal. 3: 5 *The Message*).

For those who don't know the answer, here's a clue: A woman I know was utterly drained and exhausted as a new mother by nighttime feedings and baby care demands. Night after sleepless night, she cried out to Jesus to provide what her baby needed from her. Years later, after watching her baby grow up into a bright and engaging youth, she shakes her head in wonder. "It was so hard," she says, brushing away a tear, "but you know, I miss it, and would do it all over again in a minute."

I wonder: How would our lives be different if we dared to believe these words of Jesus: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn how to live freely and lightly" (Matt 11:27-30 *The Message*).

All I know is this: I once was tired, but now I'm stoked.

I'm so thankful that I don't have to jog.

I get to.