

Celebrating Spiritual *and* Physical Fitness



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 139:13–15; 1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 9:24–27; Eph. 2:8; 2 Tim. 2:3–5; 4:7; Heb. 11:6.*

Memory Text: “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (*Isaiah 40:31, NIV*).

Much effort had gone into the preparation that ultimately led to Roger Bannister running the mile in under four minutes. There was endless training and practice that included, among other things, strenuous mountain climbing. Meanwhile, others around the world had their eyes on the prize that had meant so much to this young athlete.

May 6, 1954, dawned, the day that Bannister had been preparing for emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically for years now. Yet, the morning before, he had slipped on a polished floor and limped the rest of that day! Nevertheless, the race began the next day, and Bannister ran the mile in 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds—the first person to run the mile in less than four minutes!

Using imagery from athletics, the apostle Paul encourages us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (*Heb. 12:1, NIV*). Yet, the race Paul is talking about is a race so much more important than the one Bannister won! This race demands our best possible spiritual and physical fitness, and an important component of that fitness is derived from exercise, our topic this week.

The Week at a Glance: Physical exercise is a very important part of keeping and maintaining our health.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 17.*

The Spiritual Athlete

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). What was Paul, the great teacher of salvation by faith alone, talking about here? What point was he making?

Across the centuries, humans have been fascinated with athletics, and many have marveled at feats of the athlete. Who hasn't at times been envious of what these people have done with their bodies? And yet, whatever their natural abilities, most of these people achieved what they did through sheer hard work.

Someone once asked an award-winning, long-distance runner if the runner thought this person could become a great runner, as well. “Sure,” the athlete replied, “all you need to do is run 15 miles a day for six days a week and then, on the seventh, run 25. Do that for a year, and you'll have a good chance of making it.”

The Bible, in numerous places, compares the life of faith with some sort of athletic endeavor. Read the following texts (1 Cor. 9:24–27, Phil. 3:12–14, 2 Tim. 2:3–5). What basic point are they making, and how have you experienced the meaning of these texts yourself?

From merely looking at their facial expressions, one easily can form an incorrect impression of how much (or little) joggers, cyclists, and runners are enjoying themselves. It sometimes may appear that the whole endeavor is a punishment. There are, however, many benefits to persisting with an exercise program. These will be discussed later in the week. The benefits come from the determined application and discipline required to perform the exercise itself. There are certain rules to be adhered to. Regularity of exercise is essential. There must be a goal and sometimes even a prize.

These principles apply to both spiritual and physical fitness. To be spiritually fit, we need to focus on Jesus. We need to read His Word, pray, and meditate. There are so many things that distract our attention. These may include good and noble causes—our work, studies, or even church activities. But we need to cast off the activities and distractions that keep us from growing in grace and prioritize our goals if we are going to finish strong.

When Faith's Muscles Atrophy

Read Ephesians 2:8 and Hebrews 11:6. How are these verses related? Most important, how do we maintain and build up the faith that we have been given as a gift?

Those who have suffered a broken bone or severe joint sprain have experienced the immobilization necessary for healing to take place. Supportive casts, bandages, and even surgical pins are used to help stabilize an injured joint or fractured limb. As a result of the immobilization, the muscles related to that particular area are not used. With this lack of use, a process of atrophy, or wasting, occurs. The muscles become thin and weak. When the healing of the bone or joint has taken place, movement begins to return, and with sustained use and exercise, muscle strength is regained.

“Action is a law of our being. Every organ of the body has its appointed work, upon the performance of which its development and strength depend. The normal action of all the organs gives strength and vigor, while the tendency of disuse is toward decay and death. Bind up an arm, even for a few weeks, then free it from its bands, and you will see that it is weaker than the one you have been using moderately during the same time. Inactivity produces the same effect upon the whole muscular system.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 237, 238.

So it is with faith. If faith is not exercised, it does not grow. The vital movements and actions of the limbs and body of faith cannot take place. Though faith is a gift, if it is not exercised, if we do not make choices based on it, if we do not reach out and by it claim God's promises, if we are not willing to take chances based on faith, if we will not exercise faith to the point of being brought to our knees in submission and humility, then we are in danger of losing it.

What a tragedy, because faith is one of the most precious of all God's gifts. Only those who know what it's like to live in this world without faith, without the knowledge of God, without the hope found in His promises, can tell you just how wonderful and precious a gift it really is.

How often are you exercising the gift of faith? You might say that you believe and that you have faith, but how well do your actions show it? How can you learn to exercise your faith daily in small things so that when big things come, you will be able to reveal the faith that you profess?

Believing Without Seeing

The dejected young officer kicked a small stone in the dry, desert sand. His mother was to undergo surgery for breast cancer. The demands of the military operational schedule would not allow him to return to be at her side. With a tinge of anger and rebellion, he asked, “Why? Why? Why?” He had been praying for faith, and, in these moments, when things were not going as he wanted, when his prayers weren’t answered as he had hoped, he found his faith waning. The darkness of doubt crept into his soul, and for a few moments, he wondered if God existed at all. Then as the sun rose and the beauty of the dawn filled the sky, his mind went to some verses in the Bible, to a story that he had known since childhood, and as he dwelt upon that story, his faith returned. However difficult it was for him to understand about things, however hard it was for him to see the reasons for what had happened, he pressed on ahead, trusting and loving His Lord Jesus.

Read John 20:24–29. What does this story say to you? How often do you need to believe without seeing? Why is that such an important aspect of what it means to exercise faith?

After Jesus patiently and tenderly revealed His wounds to Thomas, Thomas acknowledged, “My Lord and my God” (vs. 28). The text that stuck in the young military officer’s mind was, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (vs. 29, *NKJV*). This was indeed the key—to believe without seeing; to take God at His word without insisting on *proof*. After all, for some folk, all the *proof* in the world will not convince them to believe. Living by faith is, then, going on what we already know of God’s love; it means trusting God based on what we already have experienced; it means taking Him at His word because He has shown us His goodness and love—no matter how difficult our circumstances are and no matter how much we do not see or understand.

When was the last time you needed to act on faith without seeing? What happened? What did you learn from that experience that could help others who might be facing a similar situation? If you had it to do over, what would you have done differently, and why?

The Benefits of Physical Exercise: Part 1

So far this week we have been looking at what it means to exercise faith. We have looked at some of the Bible's images of athletes and racing that were used to talk about the Christian walk of faith.

At the same time, too, we have been told that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 6:19, 20*).

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20. What is Paul saying there? How might the question of physical exercise be linked to these verses?

Our bodies are gifts from God. They are not to be abused. Science has shown us, over and over, that almost every aspect of our physical being is benefited by exercise. Sure, we were not all called to sprint four-minute miles. But in almost all cases, we can do enough exercise in order to benefit ourselves greatly, not just physically but mentally and spiritually, as well.

As Christians, we do not believe in the Greek idea of a separate immortal soul. We do not believe the pagan idea that the body is somehow evil. Our minds, our bodies, these are both gifts from God, and they are very closely related. How we feel physically will impact how we feel mentally, and that will impact how we feel spiritually, as well. Everything is related, and we cannot neglect any aspect of our being without impacting other aspects, as well.

“The requirements of God must be brought home to the conscience. Men and women must be awakened to the duty of self-mastery, the need of purity, freedom from every depraving appetite and defiling habit. They need to be impressed with the fact that all their powers of mind and body are the gift of God, and are to be preserved in the best possible condition for His service.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 130.

Those who exercise can attest to the wonderful benefits that come from it. And the good news is, you do not need excessive amounts of it.

Though most of us are busy, we are commanded by God to take care of ourselves, and exercise is one important way we can do it. What about you? How much time do you spend exercising? What excuses do you use to get out of doing it?

The Benefits of Physical Exercise: Part 2

No question, just as faith needs to be exercised, our bodies do, as well. Before starting an exercise program, however, we need to be sure that our health will permit regular exercise. If there are any preexisting health conditions or disabilities, it is wise to be guided by a physician as to the appropriate intensity of exercise to be undertaken.

Three points need to be kept in mind with any exercise program: frequency, intensity, and duration.

1. Frequency. Currently, recommendations for optimal health and fitness suggest that we should exercise at least six times a week.

2. Intensity. The appropriate intensity of exercise will vary depending upon your age and medical condition. Over time, if you are consistent, you will be able to exercise harder and harder. It's good to get your heart beating faster and to work up a sweat. You have to pace yourself. What works for one person might not work for another.

3. Duration. It is estimated that 45–90 minutes of exercise per day is great. It would be beneficial if exercise were at least done for 30 minutes, six days per week. The exercise time may be divided into portions. For example, 10 minutes each morning, midday, and evening. It should be arranged to suit your program. Walking is an excellent and sustainable form of exercise.

There are many proven benefits of exercise. Regular exercise helps control weight. It is beneficial in helping to reduce high blood pressure and an important adjunct to any medical therapy for high blood pressure (under medical supervision and guidance). When exercise is regularly performed, there is a decreased incidence of Type 2 diabetes. Additional benefits to heart health include the fact that regular exercise improves the protective, healthy high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL).

Regular exercise gives one an improved feeling of well-being. This occurs partly through chemicals called endorphins, which the body produces during exercise. Exercise has been associated with delaying the onset of Alzheimer's disease, and it generally improves mental performance. People who exercise regularly have less depression. Exercise plays a role in the prevention of breast and colon cancer. The benefits are many and varied.

Read Psalm 139:13–15. Dwell on just how incredibly designed we are and what a miracle of creation our mere existence is. Why is it so important for us, then, to take care of our bodies? What kind of exercise regimen are you on, and how, if needed, could you improve what you are doing?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Touch of Faith,” pp. 59–72, in *The Ministry of Healing*.

“The only way to grow in grace is to be disinterestedly doing the very work which Christ has enjoined upon us—to engage, to the extent of our ability, in helping and blessing those who need the help we can give them. Strength comes by exercise; activity is the very condition of life. Those who endeavor to maintain Christian life by passively accepting the blessings that come through the means of grace, and doing nothing for Christ, are simply trying to live by eating without working. And in the spiritual as in the natural world, this always results in degeneration and decay. A man who would refuse to exercise his limbs would soon lose all power to use them. Thus the Christian who will not exercise his God-given powers not only fails to grow up into Christ, but he loses the strength that he already had.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 80, 81.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What other parallels can you draw between exercising faith and exercising the body? Where do the parallels break down?
- 2 Someone driving in a car saw a woman jogging. He rolled down his window and yelled, “You’re going to die, anyway!” However rude, the man was right. As important as physical exercise is, and no matter how physically fit we become, we must always remember that, in the end, we are mortal and—unless we happen to be alive when Jesus returns—we are all going to die. The best exercise regimen in the world doesn’t save us from death. Healthful living and exercise do not lead to eternal life. Only faith in Jesus does. Why is it important always to keep this distinction in mind?
- 3 If possible, bring to class some of the latest validated scientific findings on the benefits of exercise. What do the studies teach, and how can we help our church as a whole better understand the benefits of exercise? How, too, can you get church members to start exercising more than they are now?
- 4 Without being judgmental of anyone, look around at your church. Do folk look like they are getting plenty of exercise, or do they look like they need to do more? What can you do to help?

Prayer Warriors

Larisa knows the power of prayer. Prayer strengthened her during the difficult years when her homeland, Belarus, was under Communist control. Today she leads a prayer ministry that reaches out to all people.

Andrei walked into the prayer room one Sunday and asked the members to pray for him. His doctors said he was dying of cirrhosis of the liver. "I've prayed for months to be free of my addictions, but I'm weak," he said. "Please, pray for me."

The prayer group prayed for Andrei, and Larisa taught him more about God. As Andrei surrendered his will completely to God, he received victory from his addictions. His body was healed as well, and today Andrei leads one of several prayer groups in his city.

"Life was hopeless for me before God changed my life," he said. "Now I have hope and peace and a mission to reach other addicts for Jesus. I invite them to come to Jesus and find strength in prayer."

Many who come to Larisa's prayer group seeking help are not believers. Some are members of other churches, but everyone receives earnest prayer.

Lyuda, a new believer, asked Larisa to pray for her son, Maxim. He had broken his leg, and bone splinters had failed to heal properly. Doctors said he would not walk again without surgery, but they couldn't afford to pay the medical costs. The group prayed for Maxim, and a few months later X-rays revealed that the bone splinters were growing together. The boy did not need surgery.

Arturo was a Christian, but his wife was not. When she lost her voice, doctors found nodes growing on her larynx. Arturo asked Larisa and her prayer warriors to pray. Larisa said they would pray first for her spiritual well-being and then for her physical health.

Arturo's wife began attending church, and in time she gave her heart to God and was baptized. The prayer group continued praying, and when she returned to see her doctor, he could find no sign of the nodes on her larynx. Today she sings for God's glory.

"Everyone who asks for prayer receives prayers," Larisa says. "God always answers our prayers, and many have come to know Jesus because of intercessory prayer. Some have received different answers than they asked for, but God's answers are better than those they pray for."

Believers in Belarus continue to struggle for their religious freedom. Our prayers and mission offerings are helping believers in this country reach out to others.

LARISA FILIPOVA *leads a prayer group in Minsk, Belarus.*