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"Therefore, 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, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Hebrews 12:1-2

A few years back my husband and I took up running. He was a collegiate athlete on the cross country team. I was the girl who almost didn't get to go on a backpacking trip because I couldn't run a mile. Why we thought this was a good idea, I forget.

You only have to take a look at me to know that God did NOT design me to be a distance runner. Remember those skinny, scrawny kids at school who were always getting bullied? Well, it turns out they're probably great runners. Great runners are light with long legs and a build that's straight up and down for maximum efficiency mile after mile. They cut through the air like a kayak on water. Me, I'm more of a paddleboat. A big giant square spinning around absurdly trying to make it to the opposite shore.

It didn't take very many community races to realize that I was not good at this. Like that my fall-down-on-the-ground effort was two to three minutes slower than the real runners' warm up pace. There are few feelings in life more discouraging than sweating, suffering, straining, giving everything you have to give, and still getting your tail whipped.

One race in particular stands out in my mind. Everything had gone wrong. A mile and a half in, I was blown. My feet felt like they had 50-pound weights on them. As far as I could tell I was still running, but nothing in front of me seemed to actually be coming closer. It was like that nightmare where you're trying to flee for your life, but your feet won't move. Hang in there, I tried to tell myself, keep going. But all the time I was getting passed. Passed. Passed. By old people. Young people. A lady with a stroller. A guy and his dog. Yes. A dog. A household pet outran me.

It was about this point that my emotions came completely unhinged. That bitter taste of defeat was so familiar. I had felt it many times when everyone was counting on me, when I had done the very best I could - tried so, so hard - and still come up short with disastrous consequences for my husband. For my children. My parents. My friends.

I burst into tears (in case you've ever wondered, it is possible to run and cry at the same time but you'll get a horrible stitch in your side). From my place in the back of the pack I railed against God: "Why did You make me so slow? Why can't I do this? Why do I fail at EVERYTHING? Why can't you make me tall? Or strong? Even *the tiniest bit* so I can do this? Why???"

The Lord looked down upon me, crying and sweating and floundering, one giant, flaming ball of crazy by this point. And He had compassion. "Of course, I could do that, Amy," He whispered. "But

what would be the good? The point isn't that someone else is running this race. It's that you are running it, just the way you are. They're doing what they're equipped for. You're doing what you're not equipped for, but you're still doing it. Which is the greater victory? Which takes more courage? I see you. I'm here with you. Don't give up."

Have you ever felt like that? That the failure is too painful and you're so bad at the Christian life you might as well quit? If only I hadn't gotten pregnant. If only I wasn't raised in an abusive home. If my parents had loved me. If I hadn't started using drugs. If I hadn't divorced. If my family didn't suffer from mental illness. You look around at others who had loving homes and good educations and great wisdom poured into them from an early age and feel you can never measure up..... certainly not in the world's eyes, but maybe not in God's eyes either.

The great Christian writer and theologian C.S. Lewis has an excellent quote about this in his book Mere Christianity: "But if you are a poor creature—poisoned by a wretched up-bringing in some house full of vulgar jealousies and senseless quarrels—saddled, by no choice of your own, with some loathsome sexual perversion—nagged day in and day out by an inferiority complex that makes you snap at your best friends—do not despair. He knows all about it. You are one of the poor whom He blessed. He knows what a wretched machine you are trying to drive. Keep on. Do what you can."

Did you catch that? God knows all about it. In fact, He knows all about *you* - He knew you even before you knew you.

Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart.
Jeremiah 1:5

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.
Psalm 139:15-16

Indeed the very hairs on your head are numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Luke 12:7

God knew every weakness, sin, failure you would succumb to. He knew every evil that would befall you, every disadvantage that would face you. He knows you're not built for this race. And still He says not "Go away" but "Come to me." (Matthew 11:28) He doesn't tell us to quit, but to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1)

His message is always the same, even in those dark miles of life that we run through tears and great pain: Don't quit. Don't give up. I'm in it with you all the way. I will never leave you. I will never give up on you. I promise you, it will all be worth it in the end.

Run hard, friends.

And do not forget to do good and to share with others,
for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Hebrews 13:16