

Impossible Christianity

*Why Following Jesus Does Not Mean You Have to Change
the World, Be an Expert in Everything, Accept Spiritual
Failure, and Feel Miserable Pretty Much All the Time*

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Impossible Christianity: Why Following Jesus Does Not Mean You Have to Change the World, Be an Expert in Everything, Accept Spiritual Failure, and Feel Miserable Pretty Much All the Time

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To my parents

*Thank you for loving Christ, loving the church,
loving your kids, and loving each other*

Contents

Introduction: Is Christianity Supposed to Feel Impossible? *1*

- 1 How (Not) to Make Christianity Possible *11*
- 2 Who Is It That Overcomes the World? *25*
- 3 Never Enough *43*
- 4 The Camel in the Room *57*
- 5 The Infinite Extensibility of Guilt *73*
- 6 Sermon (of Misery?) on the Mount *89*
- 7 Please and Thank You *101*
- 8 A Quiet Life *117*

General Index *129*

Scripture Index *135*

Introduction

Is Christianity Supposed to Feel Impossible?

I'VE ALWAYS LIKED RUNNING, though running hasn't always liked me back.

It might be hard to tell from my intimidating physical presence today, but I wasn't a great athlete as a kid. I played a lot of right field in baseball and spent most innings putting grass in my hat. I played goalie in soccer and stood so far in the back of the net that every ball I stopped was already a goal. I played one year of football and never once touched anyone (which might have been great, except I was on defense). I fractured both of my wrists playing intramural basketball. I got multiple concussions playing hockey. I think I even struck out in kickball.

But I wasn't terrible at running. Back when I was a kid—when parents and educators were less concerned about young

INTRODUCTION

people experiencing crushing failure in life—we had to take the annual Presidential Physical Fitness test. The test, at least the one our school conducted, was a combination of push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, a standing broad jump, a rope climb, a flexibility test, and a mile run. Compared to the other boys in my grade, I was average to below average in most events. Rope climb was my particular nemesis. (“Hey kid, climb this rope to the top of your three-story gym. Don’t worry, there is a small, thin mat on the ground in case you fall from 25 feet. And if you make it to the top, you can ring a bell and then burn the inside of your thighs as you slide back down to earth.”) Considering how middling I was overall, and how much I desperately wanted President Reagan to recognize my physical fitness, I was pleasantly surprised when I was one of the first boys to finish the mile run.

I decided that afternoon that running was going to be my thing. Most young men dream of being in the NBA or the NFL. My dream was to come from behind in the anchor leg of the 4 x 400 relay and win the gold medal for Team USA. I always wanted to line up at the start of a race and know that I could run faster than everyone else around me. I never did line up with that feeling because it never was close to the reality. If Eric Liddell felt God’s pleasure when he ran, I often felt God saying to me, “Don’t quit your day job.” But still,

INTRODUCTION

I will always remember running around the baseball diamond and soccer fields at my elementary school and feeling proud that I beat most of the jocks in my grade.

That was over thirty-five years ago, and since then I've worked hard at running, with only the mildest of success. I ran through the cold Michigan winter as a junior high school student in order to get ready for my first season of real running. I notched a 2:35 in the 800 meter as an eighth grader. I looked at our high school record—an impressive 1:55 at the big public school I attended—and set my four-year goal. All I had to do was drop 10 seconds a year, and I'd have the school record as a senior. I met that goal my freshman year and my sophomore year. And that was about it. Turns out the last 20 seconds are a lot harder to trim than the first 20 seconds.

With discipline and hard work and a naturally skinny (I prefer “athletic”) frame, I have managed, at times, to be the best of the second-tier runners, or, on occasion, the worst of the pretty good runners. I was all-county JV in cross-country as a sophomore in high school, before injuries derailed my final two years. In track, I was so “good” that I think I tried every event at least once. I eventually settled in to the 110-meter high hurdles, where long legs and decent form could make up for a natural lack of speed. I won a couple races and competed one year in college. Sure, the school was NCAA

Division III, but I am an NCAA letter winner, a fact I have mentioned to my uninterested family many times. I made the conference finals in the hurdles and finished last. Like I said, the worst of the pretty good.

Now firmly ensconced in middle age, I continue to run and exercise regularly. I've read dozens of books about running. I've watched scores of YouTube videos and more track-and-field meets on TV than literally anyone I know. I've purchased lots of good running gear—from shoes to hats to singlets to special socks to short shorts (too short, my wife says). I've done road races and triathlons of various distances. Sometimes I finish near the top of my age group. Sometimes I barely finish. If you compare me to someone getting off the couch to run a Thanksgiving turkey trot, I'm pretty good. If you compare me to serious runners, I am, well, not a serious runner. I'm doing the best I can with my limited time, my limited ability, and my limited opportunities. The good news is, if my 5K time doesn't get any slower over the next thirty years, I'll be world class.

Christianity Possible

At this point, some of you are thinking, “More running stories, please!” while the other 99 percent are wishing I would have sprained my ankle and never finished that elementary

school mile (don't worry, I've sprained my ankle plenty of times). But believe it or not, my experience with running has everything to do with the title of this book. Many Christians have come to expect (and accept) that being a disciple of Jesus is a lot like my thirty-five-year journey with running. You read the books. You watch the videos. You get the right equipment. You try to be disciplined. You try to improve. But with only the mildest of success.

Maybe you have been following Jesus for many years, maybe since you were a little kid. Sometimes you feel like a winner, but mostly you feel like you are an average to below-average believer. You aren't ready to quit being a Christian. You know that being a Christian is important. In fact, it's the most important thing in your life. You like being a Christian and are willing to work hard at it. The only trouble is, Christianity seems impossible.

I should hasten to add an important clarification, lest you misunderstand what this book is about. You may think, "Ah, so this is another book about how justification is by faith alone, another book about how the gospel is good news for exhausted people, another book about how God loves us even though we are spiritual failures." Not exactly. I *do* believe in justification by faith alone—with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I *do* believe that the gospel is good news for

exhausted people—and many of us are dog-tired. But that's not what this book is about, at least not directly. This book is about the last line of that sentence above, the line about “how God loves us even though we are spiritual failures.” This book is about how that line, however well intentioned, is unbiblical, inaccurate, and unhelpful.

You and I are sometimes confused about what it means to follow Jesus. To be sure, we do not earn merit with God. As fallen creatures, we will never be good enough to make it to heaven. Salvation is all of grace from start to finish. But reveling in God's grace does not mean we should revel in being spiritual failures. He does not mean for us to feel bad all the time. He does not mean for us to be lackluster disciples. He does not mean for us to be constantly overwhelmed. He does not mean for us to feel guilty all the time. God does not mean for Christianity to be impossible.

Many Christians have resigned themselves to the fact—or at least it seems like a fact—that they will be failures as followers of Jesus. Forgiven, yes. Justified, yes. On their way to heaven, yes. But as disciples and Christians, nothing special. Just like my running career, we will work hard and enjoy a few modest accomplishments. We will do the best we can with our limited time, our limited ability, and our limited opportunities. And yet we will never have the requisite gifts

INTRODUCTION

to be truly successful. We will not perfectly keep the Ten Commandments. We will not fully live out the Sermon on the Mount. We will never pray enough. We will never give enough. We will never share our faith enough. We will not renew our city. We will not repair all that ails our nation. We will not change the world.

I once heard a well-known Christian writer claim that every author really has only one book. I hope that's not exactly true, but he was certainly correct to suggest that most authors have one big idea that finds its way into almost everything they write. As I think about the other books I've written, it occurs to me that the explicit theme of this book has been an implicit theme in many of my other books; namely, that following Christ is never easy, but it does not have to be impenetrably mysterious, exceedingly complex, and relentlessly guilt-producing. Normal people can walk in God's will (*Just Do Something*) and live a holy life (*The Hole in Our Holiness*) without being frantic all the time (*Crazy Busy*). Normal churches are worth celebrating (*Why We Love the Church*), and the mission of the church is not everything under the sun (*What Is the Mission of the Church?*). Ordinary Christians and ordinary churches can be faithful, fruitful, and pleasing to God. In short, Christianity doesn't have to be impossible.

The Race We All Must Run

Recently, my ten-year-old daughter ran a local 5K race with her good friend of the same age. They were extremely excited and nervous for their first race. Before my daughter left for the race, I looked her in the eye and said to her, with feigned intensity so she knew I was kind of serious and kind of joking, “I want you to remember three things. Jesus loves you. I love you. And you’re a DeYoung.” It was my over-the-top dad way of letting her know that I was proud of her and that she was going to do a great job. Of course, she didn’t qualify for the Olympics, and she wasn’t the fastest one out there. She stopped to walk once or twice. But she *did* do a great job. She wasn’t a failure. I wasn’t lying when I said I loved her and praised her for running so far and so fast. What dad would tell his little girl anything else?

True, if she keeps running, she’ll try to get better. Maybe she’ll be better than her brothers. Maybe she will be at the back of the pack. Either way, if she runs in the right way and for the right reasons, I’ll be proud. She won’t be a failure in my eyes. And we don’t have to live like we are failures in God’s eyes either. He saves us by his grace, gives us a new name, and then tells us to set aside every weight and run the race set before us, with a great cloud of witnesses cheering us along the way (Heb. 12:1).

INTRODUCTION

Following Christ entails suffering and endurance. The call of Christian discipleship is a costly (and liberating) summons to die to ourselves. Christianity is neither simple nor pain free. But following Jesus does not mean signing up for the Impossible Missions Force. Humility does not mean we should feel miserable all the time; meekness is not the same as spiritual failurism. The Spirit works within us. The word moves among us. The love of Christ compels us. “Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:5).

As Christians, we have a race to be run, *and* it can be run. This is a recurring theme in Paul’s letters (so if you don’t like running analogies, blame him). Paul ran purposefully, with discipline and self-control. He knew the race could be run poorly, but he also knew how to keep from being disqualified (1 Cor. 9:26–27). As he came to the end of his life—an imperfect life filled with sin and struggle—Paul did not hesitate to conclude that he had fought the good fight, he had finished the race, and he had kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7). This “chief of sinners” understood that there was laid up for him the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, would award to him on that day, and not only to him but also to all who loved the Lord’s appearing (4:8). Paul did not consider the Christian race a hopeless

INTRODUCTION

labyrinth or an ultramarathon that only the few and the fittest could survive. He believed the race he was on—the race he completed—to be a privilege. He also believed it was possible.