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# RUN FOR HIS LIFE

*SERMON GUIDE*

**TRANSFORM**FILMS®

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# Table of Contents

<i>About</i>	<b>3</b>
<i>Key Themes</i>	<b>4</b>
<i>Key Texts</i>	<b>5</b>
<i>Key Theological Trajectories</i>	<b>7</b>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<b>8</b>

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# About



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*Run for His Life* begins with an intimate conversation between father and son. Peter Monsanto, Sr. urges his son Pete, Jr. to “Finish the race.” In the rest of the film, we learn the meaning of that sentence. The film focuses on the way a son navigates his experience of his father’s imprisonment by running. The marathon he completes at the end is a powerful achievement but also a striking metaphor of the shape of faith, hope, and love.

Most of all, *Run for His Life* is a story. That is, this is not a documentary giving us vital statistics about incarceration or even an insider’s journalistic examination of the various dysfunctional parts of the criminal justice system. No, this story zooms in on one story, one life, one race that helps us feel and experience something we might not otherwise feel, experience, or know.

That is, stories can enter our hearts in a way numbers cannot. Stories can form us in fundamental ways. Stories can teach us who we are but also who we might become thanks to God’s grace. Stories can teach us what God’s justice looks like today. That is the kind of story we experience in *Run for His Life*.

This guide, therefore, turns to key themes, key texts, and key theological trajectories that emerge from *Run for His Life*. First, what themes emerge in this film? What ideas does this story elucidate for us? Second, we will turn to texts from Scripture, specifically narratives that invite us to ponder the shape of God’s justice as well as biblical texts that draw on the image of a footrace. In these texts, we find vivid stories and images that can shape who we are today. They are stories and images full of emotion. They are stories and images driven by God’s activity in a world full of injustice. They are stories and images that stick with us if we listen to them carefully. Last, we turn to a handful of theological reflections that might help further inform the work of the preacher and teacher alike.

# Key Themes

**Hard-won Hope:** Hope runs through *Run for His Life*, but this is not a hope we can equate with blithe naïveté or mere optimism. No, the hard-won hope of Pete Monsanto and his family in this film is honest about disappointment and loss and grief, even while hoping against hope. Faith, you see, is not a guarantee of ease and mere comfort but a call to solidarity with the marginalized, the oppressed, the imprisoned as well as a conviction that we can be stewards of God’s kingdom of justice. As Pete’s mother responds when he says that these are supposed to be the easiest years of her life, “... none of this is hard for me because we’re all still together.” That is a full hope, a hard-won hope. As she concludes, “You can lose everything, but as long as you have life, another breath, another day, you’re gonna make it. Don’t give up.”



Pete and his father

**Separation:** One of the most persistent feelings in *Run for His Life* is the tangibility of separation, the grief of distance, the deep sadness we feel when we cannot see and be with those we love. Pete recalls how the first thing the criminal justice system did when his father was imprisoned was to send him as far away as possible. How might this film help us name and notice the separations we and our neighbors alike experience? How might we develop more empathy for the sometimes secret separations our neighbors are suffering? As Pete explains, if his father were not imprisoned, running would be the thing they would be doing together.



Pete and his family

**Witness:** *Run for His Life* invites us to be witnesses of the story of Pete Monsanto and the race he runs in a marathon and life alike. The film invites us into the intimate spaces of a family’s life, the family dinner, the private phone conversations between a father and a son, the ambiguous victory at the finish line as tears and celebration mix. What does faithful witness to these precious stories look like for people of faith? What are our obligations when someone invites us into a story full of vulnerability and pain? How do we hold someone else’s story with love and tenderness and empathy and perhaps a bit of prophetic rage?

# Key Texts

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Below are two sets of texts that would be excellent ways to enter the Scriptures in a sermon reflecting on the themes lifted up in *Run for His Life*. The first set of three texts pick up the image of foot-racing as a metaphor for the life of faith. The second set of four texts zooms further out to help congregations reflect on the dynamics of the criminal justice system that this film helps highlight.

**Running through the Scriptures:** Pete shares the deep connection with his father that running helps him feel. Why? Because what holds them together is that both are running, whether on the streets of New York or in a recreational yard in prison. Pete declares, “I’m going to run for you. I’m going to be your legs outside of the prison.” For preachers and teachers then, it is striking how often the New Testament draws upon the image of running as a metaphor for a life of faithfulness.

**1 Corinthians 9:24-27:** Paul here describes his own ministry and the difficulties he faces following the path God has laid before him. He compares his ministry to the training and discipline athletes must nurture in order to achieve victory. In a race, only one can win; thus, Paul says, run the race to win, not a mere trophy but an everlasting crown. That is, the way of faith is like a race in that we ought to strive for the finish line with every hope and effort we have. And yet, in God’s economy, there is not but one victor. The finish line is open to many. The race demands so much of us—persistence, discipline, sweat, tears—but the cost of the race does not compare to the victory God has promised.

**2 Timothy 4:6-8:** Here, the author of 2 Timothy writes in a Pauline persona, describing how Paul might have looked back upon his own ministry as he saw his own life drawing to a close. An elderly “Paul” writes to a young Timothy, providing his own long life as a model for a young leader. In v. 6, the author of 2 Timothy alludes to a time of test, likely referring to Paul’s last imprisonment and ultimate execution: “As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come.” As he sees his life ending, he is not filled with lament so much as a sense of accomplishment: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” In 2 Timothy, such is not a human accomplishment so much as a divinely appointed track. It is the Lord who rewards all of us “... who have longed for his appearing” (v. 8).

**Hebrews 12:1-2:** After recalling a litany of heroes and heroines of the faith as exemplars for us to follow, Hebrews concludes with images of a race: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us ....” But this is a race in which we seek not victory so much as the Jesus who goes before us as “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” It turns out that the victor of this race is not

the athlete with natural gifts but the crucified savior who embraces shame and finds a place "...at the right hand of the throne of God."

## Justice and Liberation in the Scriptures

**Luke 4:16-19:** We can read these verses as Jesus' mission statement. Wherever he walks, he brings justice and liberation in his wake. A viewing of *Run for His Life* highlights two promises here. Jesus points to the ancient prophecy that God "...has sent me to proclaim release to the captives" and "... to let the oppressed go free." How do these promises Jesus makes at the very beginning of his ministry come to life in the stories of those imprisoned but also those who hurt when their loved ones are imprisoned?

**Luke 23:44-49:** In Luke, the cross is a tragedy. Luke emphasizes Jesus' innocence throughout the passion narratives (e.g., 22:51-53; 23:4, 9, 14-15, 41, 47). Jesus had done nothing to merit this cruel, public execution. He was innocent of all charges according to Luke. The cross is a display of imperial arrogance and incompetence. As Jesus is passed from ruler to ruler, the frailty and cruelty of Roman power is laid bare. This is not a system of justice but a broken exercise of power that treads upon the weak and the powerless. In this way, Luke's Jesus is not alone. He is accompanied by many other anonymous victims of Rome's imperial violence. In this way too, Jesus becomes a sibling of others unjustly imprisoned or executed by the powerful. Notice that the first reactions to Jesus' death are grief and sorrow among those who had gathered to watch a "spectacle" (23:48). Like crowds gathered to watch a lynching in their Sunday best, these neighbors of Jesus had looked to the spectacle of empire for some relief or diversion or a violent display of the security a certain kind of empire can provide. Instead, they found a mirror in the cross of Jesus, a mirror that reminds us all that we too can easily become the victims of such vicious, indiscriminate state violence and that we too can join a crowd demanding the death of the innocent or at least join a crowd looking for a "spectacle." In Luke, the cross is a tragedy, one that echoes throughout time and space, crossing the boundaries of eras and nations. Jesus' cross, in this way, is not unique. Jesus' cross was and, is borne by many others. In Luke, the cross is a tragedy, a real tragedy, but it is also prologue to good news. In what ways has our justice system become a "spectacle" of inequity and injustice?

**Acts 1:4-8:** Next, we turn to the opening verses of Acts. As Matthew L. Skinner notices in *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, one of the first instructions Jesus gives his followers in Acts is to wait. Before heading to the ends of the earth, they are told to wait for the Spirit to descend upon them. Waiting can feel endless sometimes. Waiting can feel so cruel, so pointless. Here, waiting is a prelude to the gift of the Spirit. In addition, Jesus calls his disciples to be witnesses of what they have seen, to share what they have experienced so

that the world might be transformed. And last, Jesus promises to return. What does it feel like to wait for the promises God has made?

**Acts 28:30-31:** The final verses of Acts find Paul imprisoned and in chains. And yet the final word in the whole book is one Greek word translated in the NRSV as “without hindrance.” Paul is unhindered, unbound in a Roman prison even as he awaits his execution. As Acts closes, Luke may be calling us to imagine ourselves in Paul’s plight and thus nurture a faithful courage in the face of imperial oppression.

## Key Theological Trajectories

1. **Tangible Liberation in God’s Promises and God’s Salvation:** Jesus’s first sermon in the Gospel of Luke starts with a liberating, prophetic word from Isaiah. In his hometown synagogue, Jesus reads that the Spirit of the Lord has sent Jesus “...to proclaim release to the captives” (Luke 4:18). This promise is not just metaphorical. That is, Jesus is not just promising to deliver us from metaphorical chains, figurative bars but from physical, tangible imprisonment. In what ways can communities of faith see themselves as agents in creating a kingdom of God where Jesus proclaims “release to the captives?” Moreover, in what way are those of us who stand outside of the justice system ironically imprisoned to its injustices? In what ways does the prison industrial complex afflict even those of us who have never interacted with these systems of injustice?
2. **God’s Grace and Justice are Interwoven:** Pete shares that one hope he has for his running of the marathon is “... to make sure people know our names in a positive light.” This is not just a personal matter; this is a question of truth. That other folks would know the family name for everything they are is a form of restoration and justice. God’s grace and justice are not opposites. In some churches, God’s justice is primarily in preaching and teaching. God is a righteous judge whose wrath must be appeased. In other churches, God’s grace is primary. God is a generous deliverer. Both are critical facets of our theology, for a God who is graceful but not just cannot repair a fractured world, and a God who judges but is not graceful cannot heal us. We all need a second chance. We all need the world to be set right. And God’s judgment is not something any of us should fear; instead, God’s judgment liberates us from injustice and oppression. Moreover, God’s grace is God’s eternal, expansive love that repairs and makes all things right. The two work together to draw us into God’s kingdom.
3. **God’s Salvation Restores and Repairs:** Pete’s mother recalls in the film how the police who came to arrest Pete Sr. instructed her that she had only eight minutes to gather whatever belongings she needed before leaving the house. She says, “That was just like death itself.” That feeling of death demands a response and restoration and repair. Precisely because salvation is embodied and communal, God’s salvation is restorative and reparative. That is, when God saves, God stitches communities

back together. When God saves, what we have broken is repaired. God breaks systems of oppression. God sets a broken world right.

4. Salvation is Embodied and Communal: Pete says at one point, “Having an incarcerated parent is a story that needs to be told over and over again. When you got a parent in jail, it’s like you’re doing the jail bid with them.” That is, imprisonment does not just affect the individual but a whole community. We might add that the communal effect of discriminatory policing and the prison industrial complex is a communal harm as well. Sin is personal and structural, individual and communal. Perhaps *Run for His Life* can help us remember that salvation too is communal; God’s grace and salvation transforms whole communities and sets them on the path toward reconciliation and repair. Moreover, salvation is embodied. God saves not just our souls; God saves our very bodies in tangible and transformative ways.

## Conclusion

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In February 2021, Peter Sr. was released from prison through a compassionate release program. Having served a sentence for more than 30 years, father and son are now reunited. While this marvelous news is not narrated in *Run for His Life*, it is a fitting epilogue but one that preachers and teachers ought to treat carefully. After all, millions of children and parents remain separated due to incarceration. Not all of their stories will culminate with a happy reunion. Or that reunion may still be many years down the road. Our preaching and teaching, however, may find here an opportunity point to the kind of hard-won hope named above. A hope that sustains throughout years of waiting and expectation. A hope that demands better not just for me or my family but for every person and every family. We might remind ourselves that this is a kind of hope that never disappoints us because it is a hope invested in a God who keeps promises, even if their fulfillment is delayed or unexpected.

Christians sometimes turn to the Bible as a rule book for life, a ready guide for the complications we face in our lives. However, my encouragement here as you imagine how *Run for His Life* and your preaching and teaching might come together is to think about how the Bible’s images and stories evoke our imaginations. These powerful pictures into human and divine life to which we keep returning are not done with us. Let the emotional realities narrated in *Run for His Life* bring a complex of feelings and hopes to your preaching. And may your preaching and teaching thus inspire communities seeking God’s justice with every step they take in the race that is the life of faith. Pete’s coach exhorts him to “enjoy the moment, enjoy the race.” There is joy in the walk of faith and the work of justice, a joy you too can share with that community you have been called to lead.



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