

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.

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

To view and/or download a Hope Channel program on this week's lesson, visit www.lifesbeat.org.

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 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Philippians 3:12–14, and 2 Timothy 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.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Corinthians 9:25*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the importance of using and improving mentally, physically, and spiritually what God has given us.

Feel: Acknowledge our accountability to God as stewards for the bodies He has made for us.

Do: Stretch and strengthen our physical muscles daily, as well as our faith muscles.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Use It, Don't Lose It

A Like the servant in Matthew 25:14–28, who hid his gift and lost it, God has made us accountable for every single gift He has given us. What are the benefits of using the muscles God has given us?

B What are the costs of not exercising our muscles properly?

II. Feel: We Are Not Our Own

A While God has given us free will, if we don't acknowledge our responsibility to discipline our physical bodies, we will reap the results not only physically but mentally and spiritually, as well. How should we care for God's gifts properly?

B How can we express praise to God as we use and improve His gifts?

III. Do: Training Schedule

A What types of activity have you noticed are most beneficial for you?

B What lifestyle choices can you make in the next week to bring more movement into your life?

C How can you stretch and develop your faith?

▶ **Summary:** Our bodies and our faith are gifts from God. We are responsible to Him for exercising them in order to keep them useful and healthy for His service.

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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Physical health is the foundation for a sound mind and a healthy spiritual life.

Just for Teachers: Choose a volunteer to read the lesson overview below before inviting the class to participate in the opening activity.

What are some of the motivations for maintaining physical health? Obsessing over the answer to this question is nothing new. Ancient Greeks idolized the human form. Its care was deemed highly important. Speaking of physical health in the context of Herod's architectural accomplishments during the Roman Era, *Eerdmans' Family Encyclopedia of the Bible* states, "Greek-style athletics were also performed in the stadium and in the gymnasium. The Greeks believed that exercise of this kind was necessary for a healthy body."—*Guideposts* (Carmel, N.Y.: 1978), p. 222. In a number of Eastern religions, physical exercise has considerable spiritual significance. Many moderns pursue exercise to glorify not God but self—to look "sexy." Our study explores the role and significance of physical exercise for the Christian's life. If our bodies are indeed "bought with a price" and are "the temple of the Holy Spirit," if we are committed in whatever we do to "do all to the glory of God," how may that affect our exercise habits?

Opening Activity:

Option A: If time and weather permit, lead the class on a short walk, preferably outdoors, and do some light stretching exercises. Ask the question "What, if anything, does this have to do with my relationship with God?"

Option B: Pass out paper and pencil and ask members to make a log of their physical exercise for the previous week. Ask the question from Option A.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Ancient Greeks believed in a dichotomous human nature. There was the physical side, represented by the body, and the spiritual side, represented by the soul. Thus, a soul could exist independent of a body. The Hebrews, on the other hand, took a more wholistic approach. For them the soul was the integration of spirit and body (*Gen. 2:7*). It stood to reason, then, that what affected the body affected the spirit, and vice versa. Caring for the physical nature would have an impact on the total person. Keep this concept central in your presentation.

CONTINUED ►

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?


Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Bible Commentary****I. The Spiritual Athlete** (*Review 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 with the class.*)

The verses above are among many allusions in Scripture to athletics—in particular, running—as a metaphor of the Christian life. Paul recognized the parallels between physical training and spiritual preparation. A modern-day distance runner, even at the high school level, might have an exercise regimen that looks something like this: Daily preparation—800 meters in warm-up laps, plus stretching exercises; three days per week—interval training to develop rhythm and speed (running shorter distances, usually 200–400 meters, at an accelerated pace for an hour to an hour and a half); two days per week—distance runs of 6 to 12 miles to develop stamina and mental toughness; one day per week—hill training to develop strength (running steep grades near full speed with *brief* periods of rest in between). There also would be morning workouts in the weight room for 45 minutes to an hour. One day per week—rest. The athlete also monitors diet carefully, avoids late activities to get adequate rest, and exercises self-discipline in all endeavors. (*See also Phil. 3:12–14, 2 Tim. 2:3–5, 4:7, Heb. 12:1–3.*)

Consider This: How important is it for the believer to be as equally serious about cultivating the spiritual life as it is for the athlete to cultivate the power of the body? What spiritual exercises do you incorporate into your *daily* routine that offer such benefits as spiritual stamina, strength, and rhythm? What practices should you avoid in order to have a closer run with God?

II. Believing Without Seeing (*Review John 20:24–29 with the class.*)

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (*Heb. 11:6, NIV*). Someone said that when we understand and then trust, that is wisdom; but when we do not understand and still trust, that is faith. Thomas was operating on the level of wisdom. If he could see, understand, or touch for himself, he would believe. What pleases God, however, is exercising trust in Him during the times in which we cannot see or touch. This faith grows, strengthens, and expands with use. Like our physical muscles, exercised faith increases our capacity to “move mountains” (*see Mark 11:23*).

CONTINUED 

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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: What actions can I take to exercise my faith? If I never attempt greater challenges than what can be accomplished with the resources I already have, how will my faith ever grow? Conversely, why does faith atrophy as a result of limited plans and vision?

III. The Benefits of Physical Exercise (Review 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20 with the class.)

Exercise and temperance have a long conjoined history. Note this quotation from the Greek Stoic Epictetus, who lived more than one hundred years after Christ's death: "Would you be a victor in the Olympic games? so in good truth would I, for it is a glorious thing. . . . You must then live by rule, eat what will be disagreeable, refrain from delicacies; you must oblige yourself to constant exercises at the appointed hour, in heat and cold; you must abstain from wine and cold liquors; in a word, you must be as submissive to all the directions of your master as to those of a physician."—James M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1972), p. 457.

Consider This: What *spiritual* benefits might you receive from *physical* exercise? As spiritual truth is received through the mind, how does physical exercise improve mental perception? Generally speaking, who do you think makes a better witness to the goodness of God—a grossly overweight chronic complainer who is dependent on pills or a physically fit, mentally alert, happy Christian? Why?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It has been said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Surely all class members would claim that they want to exercise more. Yet how many of us do? Use the following case studies to generate solutions for our excuses. In "helping" these third parties, how are we helping ourselves to resolve our own procrastination?

Case 1: Sharon wants to lose weight and eats "like a bird" but still cannot lose. Her doctor has ruled out any abnormal conditions. She knows that if she exercised, it would stimulate her metabolism and facilitate weight loss, but she complains that she is too fat to exercise and hardly can walk to the mailbox without running out of breath. How can we help her?

Case 2: Volker feels that he never was good at sports in school, because he always was picked last. His closest friends feel the same way. They take pride

CONTINUED ►

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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

in being computer geeks: they claim to be allergic to sun, sweat, and exercise. How can we encourage him to be more active?

Case 3: Rosita is a widow raising five children on her own, working a job and a half to support them. She says that she wants to get more exercise but simply does not have the time. How can we overcome our tendency to excuse her and help find creative ways to introduce exercise into her busy routine?

Case 4: Ahmed is an up-and-coming young professional. He is very bright and is admired for his business savvy. He comes from a poor background and is anxious to make his mark in the world and lift his family from poverty. To do this he works excessively, getting inadequate sleep and no physical exercise. Laudable as his goals are, how can we help Ahmed achieve balance?

▶ **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Having studied the role of exercise scientifically, historically, and biblically and having tackled some of the excuses we make for not exercising, we now need to put our knowledge to work. (Stress that it is important to consult a doctor and, for the more ambitious, an exercise physiologist before making dramatic changes in any exercise program.)

Action Steps:

- 1 Pass out sheets of paper and pencils. Have members divide the sheets into two columns.
- 2 On the left, members should write down those forms of exercise in which they are engaged currently. Encourage honesty! Pencil *pushing*, truth *stretching*, and *running* out of excuses do not count. Some may have completely blank left columns. That is acceptable.
- 3 Next, ask members to write down achievable exercise goals in the right column. (Running the marathon next month should not be on too many lists if we are to take achievability seriously.)

Below each goal, they may write down the action steps they will take to reach the goal. For example—**Goal:** Within six months to run three miles every morning before work. **Action Steps:** (A) First month—begin by walking around the block a few times! (B) Work up to jogging a half mile by the end of the month. (C) Second month—extend the length of the jog to a full mile. (D) Get to bed earlier in order to facilitate earlier rising so that there will be increased time for running in the morning, and so on.

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?