

Focus and Faith (Run the Race)
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Introduction

It was 1969 and in a junior high school (grades 7-9) in Gallatin, Tennessee, USA, a 7th grade boy saw a bulletin posted in the school hallway, announcing an opportunity for students to become involved in the track and field team. He was interested - he loved sports - so the coach in charge found the boy's name signed near the top when he picked up the list at the end of the week. After the first few workouts, it became clear that the new recruit was not fast enough for sprints, flexible enough for hurdles or high jump, nor strong enough for shotput and discus, compared to the older boys in 8th and 9th grades. So, he asked him if he'd like to try middle distance running. Why not, he thought, if that put him on the team?! So, the 800-meter run became his event.

Over the next several weeks, the boy learned a lot; I know because that young runner was me! The 800 meter required more endurance than speed, and more pacing than passion. Runners who came off the starting gun with lots of energy may too quickly fatigue and fade but start too slowly and one would lose distance that would be hard to make up. As I ran, I would hear my coach's voice in my head: "Be focused, be steady, be smart!" And I got better in the 800, enough to qualify for the district meet – pretty good for a 7th grader! But when I saw all those 8th and 9th graders I would be competing lining up I began to doubt, then once we started I began to lose my focus the further behind I got and felt all alone on the last lap and ultimately became the last one to cross the finish line. My coach caught me a few steps later and asked why I had slowed down at the end; when I explained how I felt, he replied, "That's too bad; you were only 5 seconds off of the school record for the 800." (Sigh/hit head) Ok, so later I found out that there had only ever been 3 others who ran the 800 at our school, and my time was more than a minute behind the middle school record for the state --- but the point remained and still does to this day. Focus and faith, instead of doubt and distraction, is the way to do well in any race, on the track or in life.



The writer of the book of Hebrews obviously knew about running as a sport, obviously familiar with the athletic imagery depicted in chapter 11 where we look today, drawn from their familiarity with Greco-Roman culture and the Olympic Games and other sports that it spawned. It follows the great stories of the heroes of Hebrew faith, much as wrestlers did combatting the challengers and obstacles that faced them with their most effective tactic being that of faith, the certainty of what was hoped for without being seen. Then chapter 12 continues with the theme of faith, beginning with the vision of a great arena or stadium filled with those cheering for runners on the track within. It reads like this:

“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 the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1-3),

Some of you may have been on a track team or ran competitively in younger years, while others of you may run regularly for exercise or to reach a health goal for weight or muscle tone. But perhaps even those who have never run for sport or for health can still imagine how running might parallel a life of faith in Christ. I’ll be the example here, though it’s been years since I ran competitively or for fun. I might run with others or run alone, though with another makes it more enjoyable and the accountability assures that I will follow through. I want good shoes that help, not hinder, my pace and clothing that enables the run rather than slows me down. Without a track, I have to create a path or plan of where and how far to run and keep my eyes ahead and on my target so that I don’t find myself too tired with too far yet to go - or lost! And I expect it to hurt when I first get started but cannot let that stop me, because “no pain, no gain.” I can’t get discouraged when I am out of breath or hurting from yesterday’s run. If I am going to meet my goals, I have to devote the time, get rid of distractions, commit to being disciplined, and get going.



But let’s put you as students – young and passionate – on the track team, as I once was, though this time in a race of faith. What does it mean for you to run this race - as a follower of Christ, as a disciple, as a minister of the gospel? I see four factors – with four hindrances or entanglements – that will make or break you in running this race:

- You must be **Singular** in focus
- You must train and run **Sacrificially**, and
- You must be **Surrounded** by those who encourage and challenge you
- You must be **Strong**

Along the way, these questions will loom large:

- Will you be **Distracted**?
- Can you overcome any **Lack of Discipline**?
- How will you deal with **Feeling Deserted**?
- Does **Doubting** sometime lead to discouragement or defeat?

I. Single Focus

Let’s begin with what may be the most crucial aspect of your race: what (or who) will be your focus? The theme for chapels this year is ***Fix Your Eyes on Jesus***. What does it mean to “fix” your eyes? Are

they broken and need repair – isn't that what it means to fix them? For some that may be the first step to having a Christlike vision. But *fix* is another one of those difficult English words that can mean so many different things, such as:

- “Affix” (physically attach)
- “Make stable, fasten securely” (like something that has fallen off a wall)
- “Prepare” (as we do for food or drink)
- “Decide/settle on” (such as fixing a date to do something)
- “Focus attention”

And it's that last meaning of fix that I believe is most significant to run the race as Jesus' disciple. **Make Him your singular focus!** Some of you come from or will go minister within a culture that believes in multiple gods or deities that demand one's attention; others will find themselves in a place where the competing “gods” are money, material things, and selfish ambition. But the instruction is clear: **fix your eyes**, even your head and your heart, on Jesus as Lord of your life. Don't just make Him #1; make Him everything that your life revolves around and gives all of life meaning and purpose.

The biggest hindrance or entanglement to that focus? Becoming distracted and taking your eyes off and your heart away from Him. I love – and hate – a photo of Olympic champion Usain Bolt from



Jamaica running a 100m semifinal at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. The photographer who took it said, “He was ahead enough that he kind of looked back at other athletes and gave a big smile in full stride, I suppose you can do that when you're the fastest in the world. But for the rest of us, looking back and smiling at the crowd or a camera will break our stride and knock us off the medal stand. Keep your focus in spite of distractions!

The most memorable biblical distraction had to be in Matthew 14 during a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had sent His disciples to the other side while he retreated to a mountainside to pray. A storm came up and amid their struggle with the sea, they saw Jesus walking on the water to them. They were terrified and couldn't believe it was Him. He called out for them to take courage and Peter did – “If that's you, Jesus, tell me to come out to you on the water.” He did, and Peter did. Verse 30 however records that when he saw the wind, his fear took over and he began to sink. As a fisherman he could swim but the waves made that very hard, so he cried out for Jesus to come and save him, which He did. “Why did you doubt?” Jesus asked. Distractions can do that to you.

If you spend much time on social media, you probably in one form or another saw what was named the most popular meme on 2017, that is an image and text created to make a humorous or serious point about an idea or belief that spreads rapidly (virally) from one person to another on the internet. This was the “Distracted Boyfriend” meme, which illustrated that no matter how devoted a person may be to an idea or practice, it can be awfully easy to be distracted by something else to the detriment of what you really should be spending your time on. Like knowing you have assignments and papers due for class but getting on Facebook (or watching YouTube) can pull your attention away. When that happens, re-focus, and, as Peter did, learn a lesson from the rescue to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus!



II. Sacrificially

Along with a singular focus, running the race successfully will require sacrifice. We’ve already seen the significance of stripping away whatever may weigh down in our commitment. Though we share some of those sacrifices in common, some of the areas I need to address in my life may be different than yours, and vice versa --- personal history, bad habits, temptations, cultural or personality differences that can build walls rather than bridges between us or can separate us from God. Some of you may face opposition or even rejection in your family or in your village or city to your belief in Christ or your calling to ministry, and in such have followed His example as you endure and not lose heart.

In Colossians 3, the Apostle Paul urges us, as we set our minds and hearts on things above, on God’s priorities in our lives, to put to death “whatever belongs to our earthly nature: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, and racial prejudice and bigotry. He describes that as taking off your old self with its practices and has no place in your new life in Christ, which sounds a lot like Hebrews 12:1 and throwing off everything that hinders or entangles us. “We have been **crucified** with Christ” Paul proclaims in Galatians 2:20, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Praise be to God!

Yet it stands to reason that a call of sacrificial living can get entangled by a lack of discipline. The



Hebrew writer wastes little time in moving from the endurance and perseverance needed for the race to this matter of discipline in chapter 12, verses 7-11. It is true that discipline usually begins from the outside, prompted by the love of an earthly father or mother’s love to help us to do what is right and best (Hebrews 12:9-10). And it hurts, both in the shame or sorrow it brings and in the struggle to move through it to where we need to be on the journey of life. Often

the hardship we face itself acts as discipline --- it refines us and produces godliness in our lives as we learn its lessons. Over time our self-discipline trains us to live in right relationship to God as we cultivate spiritual practices in our life. And *“those who sow to the Spirit will reap eternal life”* (Galatians 6:8)

III. Surrounded

Third, the wonderful truth is that as one who is in this race, even with its struggle and sacrifice, you are **Surrounded** – you are not alone! Chapter 12 begins with the second of two “Therefore’s.” The first begins in Hebrews 10:19 as an invocation to worship of a high priest who has blazed a trail for us to be near to God with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith (v. 22). Our trust begins and ends in Him, our great Savior! Just as Jesus Himself did, we can know God as a loving Father in whom we can hold unswervingly to the hope we profess in Him (v. 23). He is faithful, and because of that we can be faithful to each other --- which includes spurring each other on in the race. The image of a spur is interesting – in a saddle on a horse, a spur challenges us and keeps us accountable to love and do what is good and right on behalf of others. But it also means finding our joy in being together and encouraging each other – we gather each Lord’s day to do just that.

Chapter 11 reminds us of those who have gone before us who model for us commitment and perseverance in the face of danger and even death. The stories provide a grand entry into the arena where we now run, surrounded by these witnesses who urge us on to run with perseverance as they did even though they did not receive the “rest of the story” and the promise that has been revealed to us. So, we are not alone in this race!

Yet the feeling that we are alone, that others don’t understand how hard the race is for us and don’t have the same struggles as we do, may still haunt us from time to time, creating that weight, that burden that can hinder us with feelings of desertion or abandonment. Later in chapter 12, after acknowledging the hardship that is often part of the race, the Hebrew writer turns back to our responsible together --- in verses 12 and 13, urging us to strengthen those who are weak and nourish those who are tired. Together we must make sure that the paths we run do not make others stumble or lead them astray, healing them rather than disabling them. As we run we pursue peace and holy love that honors and protects each other (verses 14-17). And we must not be remiss in celebrating in joyful assembly what we have together. We are on the team together!



IV. Strong

Finally, we have to run strong. Notice that we don’t start with strength --- we begin with a single focus to guide us and keep us on track, progress by making the sacrifices required and accepting then cultivating the disciplines needed and are supported through a historic tradition and a current community

of fellow believers, role models, and encouragers who surround us with nurture, accountability, and love. And then our faith can begin to grow in strength and endurance.

But it doesn't happen overnight. We were halfway through the book of Matthew and Simon Peter was still being distracted and fearful, even though he began his trip out of the boat with his eyes on Jesus. Jesus' question to Peter when pulling him out of the water wasn't "Why take your eyes off of me?" but "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" His focus on Jesus was indeed just the beginning; what he still lacked was total trust in the one he was following that was strong enough to withstand the wind and the doubt it could produce. That kind of faith is a result of our daily relationship with Jesus, who is the Author and Perfecter of our faith --- it is He who gets it started and He who brings it to full maturity as we walk in His steps and live as His disciples.



I mentioned in the beginning some of the distance running stars that I followed and cheered for when I was in high school. One of those was Steve Prefontaine, a University of Oregon who began in 1969 and won seven NCAA titles set nine collegiate track records. At one time, he owned every American track record (8) between 2,000 and 10,000 meters and between two miles and six miles, and he broke his own or other American records 14 different times. What a runner! He was coached by Bill Bowerman, who trained 31 Olympic athletes during his 24 years coaching at Oregon, one of whom was Steve Prefontaine. Bowerman had already begun to design running shoes with another former Oregon athlete Phil Knight and, obsessed with shaving weight off his athletes' running shoes, believing that custom-made shoes would weigh less and cut down on the overall drag on their energy. The company they began as Blue-Ribbon Sports and Prefontaine help to popularize before his untimely death in 1975 is known today as Nike.

One of Coach Bowerman's principles was that *"The real purpose of running isn't to win a race, it's to test the limits of the human heart."* He created a high-altitude training program for runners that increased their strength and stamina that was adopted by the U.S. Olympic Committee and other countries shortly after that. He was one to test the boundaries, once saying, "If there are limits to what we can do, I don't know what they are," and the movie "Without Limits" is the story of his work with Prefontaine and other great collegiate runners.

What do you believe are your limits? Where do you delay or doubt what God can do through you? Are you facing mountains? Jesus said in Matthew 21, *"Have faith and do not doubt! You can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done."* Are you troubled? Jesus said, *"Don't let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in Me"* (John 14). Do you feel tossed back and forth by the waves? Paul proclaimed that we will in all things mature in Him who is the head, that is, Christ (Ephesians 4). John, the apostle who knew Jesus best, assured us that *"by believing, you may have life in His name"* (John 20:31).

Jesus invites you to the race marked out for you. If you're in, it will take strict training and lots of straining. There is a prize ahead, the prize of knowing Christ and fulfilling His heavenly purpose here on earth, and we are called to run in such a way that His prize can be developed in us. It won't result in a record that stands to be broken but in a crown that will last forever. Forget what is behind; what is ahead is beyond our imagination.

Run the race! With a **Singular focus, Sacrificially, Surrounded, and Strong.** *"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."* May it be so, Lord. Amen.