

How Ephesians 2:10 Manifested in an Impossible Dream From Down Under

With medals around his neck for completing seven marathons in seven days on seven continents, Pastor Matthew Barnett preached to applause and shouts from his biggest fans—members of own church—on Sunday after returning from a 211-mile, global endurance challenge to the Los Angeles outreach he leads.

Besides collecting medals for finishing back-to-back, marathons in Antarctica, Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia, South and North America during a week in January 2017, Barnett raised nearly \$1.4 million for “the church that never sleeps” he co-founded with his father, Pastor Tommy Barnett, in 1996.

The medals, the money and the marathons are miracles because the 43-year-old Barnett—who was diagnosed with blood clots five years ago—was written off by a cardiologist, who told the pastor in 2012, “You’ll never run a marathon.”

Most recently ESPN, which provided coverage in the lead-up to and during the seven-day global competition, called Barnett “the least experienced runner” in the 2017 World Marathon Challenge (WMC).

American Michael Wardian, an ultra-marathoner, finished each challenge in 2:45, elevating him to first place in the men’s competition.

Among the field of competitors starting in 35-degree-below-zero temperatures and winds in excess of 50 miles per hour, Barnett joined the likes of Ryan Hall, one of the world’s fastest marathon runners and the American record holder for half marathons (59:43).

By contrast, Barnett has completed four marathons since taking up running after a health scare less than 10 years ago.

Close friends with Hall, Barnett shared lodging with the former Olympian—on only two occasions in real hotels—during the whirlwind of seven global marathons that began in the cold extremes of Antarctica, proceeded to intense heat and humidity in Miami, Florida, and ended in Australia after seven planes rides to seven continents with little sleep or recovery time between races.

Also a Christian, Hall attends a church that's widely recognized for revival, healing and worship in Redding, California. He has run the marathon faster than any American in history (2:04:58) and speaks at the Los Angeles outreach when invited by Barnett.

Still nursing a tendon he badly strained on hilly terrain in Spain—site of the fourth marathon in the seven-stage competition—Barnett shared seven lessons with residents of the Dream Center and members of its church, Angelus Temple, on his first Sunday back from the grueling WMC.

Barnett told two audiences at Angelus Temple—filled with some of his biggest prayer supporters—that he intends to use the medals as sermon illustrations, at least for a while.

But eventually, Barnett said, the medals will be awarded to some Dream Center residents who succeed in achieving personal and spiritual milestones—like his victories in the WMC—by applying the seven lessons he learned.

A best-selling author, Barnett wrote take-away lessons after each of the seven marathons—each one an encouraging, life-giving, faith-building word of empowerment. Residents of the Dream Center and Angelus Temple inspired him not only to run but to come up with seven tools for success after each marathon.

“All I kept thinking about during the (WM) challenge was running for people at the Dream Center,” Barnett said on Sunday.

Finishing the incomprehensible challenge—the biggest of Barnett’s life so far—also dominated his thoughts as the rigors and tolls of running 211.7 miles set in.

Suffering from shortness of breath, dizziness and fatigue en route to Australia for the final 26.2 miles of the WMC, Barnett concluded that a recurrence of blood clots was to blame. “I didn’t want it to be blood clots, but I was suspicious and afraid that was the case,” he said.

With four hours of flight time over ocean waters remaining before reaching Australia, Barnett began to doubt that he would see his wife and children again, asking other WMC competitors to be sure and tell his family members he loved them if he didn’t survive.

Encouraged to rest for the duration of the plane ride by runners seated near him, Barnett’s symptoms subsided but remained a concern to a medical doctor on board the plane. He insisted Barnett be thoroughly examined upon landing in Australia.

After enduring long immigration lines for arriving passengers, Barnett was taken to an Australian doctor with experience in diagnosing and treating runners, some of them world-class competitors.

The physician, who Barnett calls “one of the kindest Aussies I’ve ever met,” concluded he was suffering from a panic attack and sleep deprivation (one out of 27 hours total)—not blood clots—relieving Barnett’s greatest fear and the one obstacle to completing the WMC.

“He asked me, ‘What do we need to do to get you back on the course?’

“He then told me, ‘You’re going to finish this race, and I’m going to your website to make a donation to the Dream Center.’

“What I learned in Australia is that God can take you from the lowest lows and take you to your highest highs,” Barnett said.

It’s a lesson—not unlike the other six Barnett plans to share—that resonates with tens of thousands who live at the Dream Center or benefit from its multi-faceted job training, Bible-based discipleship, drug- and alcohol-abuse and benevolence programs. Many gain a new lease on life after hitting rock bottom when they arrive at the hospital-turned-church outreach.

Also in Australia, an outreach pastor from one of the country’s largest, most widely-know churches showed up “like an angel of mercy” to run alongside Barnett. The pastor from Hillsong Church told Barnett that he had never run a marathon but intended to go the distance with him even if it took the allotted eight hours to successfully finish.

Avoiding disqualification, Barnett finished the course in the allotted time, though it was his worst performance in the WMC. It, nevertheless, earned a seventh medal.

Hillsong also contributed a generous donation to the Dream Center, for which Barnett publicly thanked Pastor Brian Houston.

In Spain, site of the fourth marathon, Barnett’s knee began to ache. “I could feel the most excruciating pain I’ve ever felt. It just locked up and suddenly my knee formed a pain that got worse with every step.

“I realized that the race was over,” Barnett said. “The pain brought me to a stop and the realization of the end brought me to tears,” said Barnett who usually doesn’t cry.

Turning his head to hide the tears, Barnett began meditating

on a verse in the Bible that reminded him of the Lord's strength in the midst of weakness. "And the Lord spoke a word to me. He said, 'You're going to bend in this race, but you're not going to break.' "

At the conclusion of 26.2 miles through Spain, which Barnett intermittently walked and ran, he wrote the words to Lesson No. 4. "Sometimes you need to go through a breakdown before you get to a breakthrough."

In Morocco and Dubai, the difficulties and less than stellar race times continued, but there was encouragement from friends and supporters of the Dream Center in Morocco and a stranger who was in Dubai during the fifth marathon.

A businessman in Dubai with a second home in London told Barnett he learned about his participation in the WMC on social media and, after reading a verse in Galatians that morning, he knew the Lord was telling him to run alongside Barnett.

"I honestly don't know if he was human or an angel," Barnett said, "but he was there with encouragement when I was 90 percent certain of giving up."

Among the other lessons Barnett wrote down after completing each of the seven marathons are: "Progress isn't always about moving fast; it's about gaining ground; Seize the moment; Don't think about how far you have to go; and God can resurrect you from the lowest lows to the highest highs."

Modeled after the one in Los Angeles, the Midwest Dream Center (MWDC) and its director encouraged Barnett during and after the WMC.

Rhonda Burton, the director of the MWDC, told Barnett God never gives a dream that matches a budget because He's checking for faith, not bank account statements.

“I think God keep matching yours because He knows how big you can dream—and how deep your faith runs,” Burton told Barnett.

Barnett’s family wrote inspirational notes and Bible verses on cards for each of the seven races, but his wife and two children gave him a significant boost at the third marathon by flying to Miami to cheer him on to the finish line.

A welcome-home party back in Los Angeles with his father—Tommy Barnett, pastor of First Phoenix Assembly of God—on hand stirred his son. “I’ve never felt more love in all of my life,” Matthew Barnett said. {eoa}