

How to Run Your Race of Faith

Nothing more effectively protects us from sin or compels us to greater service than remembering the sufferings our Savior endured because He loves us.

In the spring of 1958 I was 7 years old and the fastest runner in my first-grade class. I did have a problem, however. I tended to veer off course when I ran.

My father worked with me every day. Speed wasn't the problem. Direction was.

On the day before a big race, my dad asked the officials to let him stand in my lane just beyond the finish line. He was convinced that if only I kept my eyes on him, my tendency to veer off course would be remedied.

It's been more than 40 years since that day, but I can still remember everything that happened. When the gun sounded, I burst out of the starting blocks. There was Dad shouting, clapping his hands and no doubt praying that I would not take my eyes off him as I ran.

As he later told the story, I supposedly took my eyes off him and began to veer into the lane next to me. Hearing his voice, I fixed my gaze back on him just in time, regained my sense of direction and raced toward the finish line. Thanks to Dad, I have a first-place ribbon in my scrapbook.

The point is simply this: Holiness, like winning the race, will come only to the degree that we keep our eyes fixed on the Son of God.

To our left and to our right the world clamors for our attention. It shouts at us with lavish claims of something better, hoping to distract us from our focus and lead us into another lane. In the world of track, that's grounds for

immediate disqualification.

But warnings about disqualification are soon forgotten once the gun sounds. The only thing that will keep us running in the right direction is having our hearts fixed on Jesus.

FIXED ON HIM Christians everywhere, if they complain, complain of two things: their inability to break free of the entangling web of sin and their strong desire to give up. Here are four things Hebrews 12:1-3 has to say about running the Christian race that might be helpful:

****Victory over sin is achieved by having our souls captivated by the Son of God. Sin turns ugly and is subject to defeat only when seen in the light of Christ's beauty.**

The author of Hebrews is not opposed to mentioning the inevitable consequences of sin. There are severe warnings in this book that are designed to deter disobedience.

But the author is no less pointed about how one should exercise restraint and abstinence. Looking unto Jesus and pursuing His blessings are portrayed throughout this epistle as "better" than any alternative options.

****Encouragement to persevere and strength to endure also come from having our souls entranced by the Son of God. Look to Jesus. Drink from the One who gives water that truly quenches spiritual thirst.**

****But what in particular about Jesus are we to look at that is supposed to help us in the fight against sin and despondency? It isn't Jesus on His throne or performing miracles. It is His willingness to embrace suffering and shame heaped on Him by sinners (see vv. 2-3).**

There is something powerfully transforming to the spirit that comes from meditating on the sufferings of Jesus. We find strength and encouragement in His sufferings because they are

precisely what secured for us the “fullness of joy” and “pleasures forevermore” that keep our hearts from wandering from His presence (Ps. 16:11, NKJV).

Knowing that Jesus suffered as we do, yet without sin, is a constant reminder that there is not struggle or pain in our lives with which He can't identify (see Heb. 2:16-18). In His sufferings we see and feel the depths of His affection for us.

****Lastly, what motivated Jesus to willingly endure suffering and shame? Joy!**

What energized His soul not to give up was the prospect of the joy that awaited Him on the other side of Calvary. When Jesus thought about spending eternity with you, He said: “Yes! I can and will embrace shame and suffering because it means I will receive a bride with whom I can spend an eternity in glad fellowship and indescribable intimacy, all to the glory of My Father.”

Here, then, is how we can run to win: Look unto Jesus.

SEEKING THINGS ABOVE There are two enemies that stand staunchly opposed to what I've been saying: legalism and asceticism. Like a life-threatening virus, they repeatedly infect the body of Christ and drain it of vitality.

Legalism comes in two forms. On the one hand are those legalists who insist on obedience to the law, especially their law, as a condition for acceptance with God. At the heart of this variety of legalism is the idea that works are a condition for justification.

The other kind of legalist may affirm salvation by grace through faith, but demands that others submit to his image of what constitutes true spirituality. Invariably he or she sets extra-biblical guidelines, identifies morally proscribed activities and then severely judges those who fail to measure up.

Asceticism is the twin brother to legalism. Not all asceticism is bad. Paul referred to godly asceticism when he spoke of buffeting his body and making it his slave, preparatory to running a race so that he might win (see 1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Sinful asceticism is described in Colossians 2:20-23. Here Paul has in mind those who impose man-made rules concerning the body and one's behavior as a means for enhancing one's relationship with God.

Paul finds fault with this approach to the Christian life on several grounds, including the fact that such rules are man-made, not divinely given. These rules, prohibitions and self-denial that spring from man's own religious creativity are utterly ineffective in curbing the desires of the flesh (see v. 23).

But Paul does have a remarkably simple remedy for fleshly indulgence. It is found in Colossians 3:1-2: "If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (NASB, emphasis added).

Holiness, in this case the ability to say no to the flesh, comes from a mind captivated and controlled by the beauty and majesty of the risen Christ and all that we are in Him in the heavenlies!

The apostle is not averse to calling us away from the earthly temptations of the flesh. But only because he has something incomparably more glorious to which he has already called us—namely, Jesus and the grandeur of heaven.

BEHOLDING HIS GLORY Becoming like Jesus is the fruit of beholding Jesus. We will take on the characteristics, values and qualities of whatever we most cherish and to which we devote our hearts and minds.

This is Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 3:18 when he says that "we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

I believe the transforming vision of the glory of Jesus is found in the anointed portrayal of Him in holy Scripture. When we drink from the fountain of Scripture, Jesus comes alive in our souls, and His beauty and loving presence are indelibly stamped on our hearts.

Paul's mirror analogy speaks of an experience wherein we are transformed from our fallen and rebellious image into that of Jesus Himself. "Seeing" Jesus in the Word effects an inward change in the core of our souls and transforms the disposition of our hearts in terms of what we love, desire, cherish and hate.

Would that this change might happen once and for all, forever putting to rest the daily struggle! But this experience of sanctification is progressive, taking us from one stage of glory to another.

HOPING IN HIM Whereas the indirect vision of Christ in Scripture sanctifies us progressively, seeing Him face to face in the future will sanctify us wholly. In either case, it is our apprehension of Christ that sanctifies (see 1 John 3:2-3).

There is some dispute as to the precise causal relationship between the vision of Christ and our final glorification. Some argue that holiness is a prerequisite to the vision of Christ and thus must precede it.

More likely, though, is the view that when Christ appears the Father will unleash a power in His people that will forever expel all sinful impulses from their souls and replace them with the mind, will, disposition and character of Christ Himself.

The possession now of such hope—securely fixed upon Him—is the strongest imaginable incentive to purity of life. Simply stated, the Christian hope is incompatible with moral indifference. The mind that is singularly fixed on meeting Jesus at His return will discover a renewed power to pursue righteousness.

This transformation will go far beyond a mere alteration of how we act and talk and look. We will not merely decline to sin; we will despise sin itself.

It takes my breath away to think of a day when my mind will be utterly free and void of greedy, lustful, envious, bitter thoughts. It's not that in heaven I'll have the strength I now lack to say no to sin. I won't need the strength because I'll forever be delivered of a nature that could even want to sin.

Oh, for the day when our hearts will instinctively recoil from the slightest contact with sin. Oh, for the day when, upon seeing Jesus, we will forever disdain contamination by the world, the flesh and the devil.

John's vision is thus of an intense, inner purification from sin because of a deep sensibility to it. And those who now long for that moment, who have fixed their hope on that day, whose souls now pant for the presence of Jesus, purify themselves now even as Jesus Himself is pure (see 1 John 3:3).

Personal transformation is the product, not so much of seeing the ugliness of sin as of seeing the beauty of the Savior. Fix your eyes on the One who is pure, gentle and merciful, who endured so much for us. Consider Jesus. Meditate on Him.

Sam Storms is the author of numerous books, including *The Singing God* (Creation House). He desires to see the Word and the Spirit united in the lives of all believers.