
Stay Focused and Alert in the Race of Faith

A sermon on Hebrews 12:1-2 by Coty Pinckney preached at Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte NC, August 10, 2008

You've trained for years. Day after day. Season after season. Long runs. Interval training. You're prepared.

Now the opening ceremonies are over. Your Olympic race day has arrived.

Over the course of anywhere from a few seconds to a bit over 2 hours, you must put into play all you've learned; you must put into effect all the strength work, all the cardiovascular work you've done. One mistake, one brief loss of focus, one moment of indecision could set aside years of training.

What do you need to remember as you race in order to run to win?

How will you run the race?

A number of you have run in events where place is completely irrelevant. You're not so much running AGAINST others in the race, as WITH them. Your goal is not to beat others, but to complete the distance, or to achieve a particular time.

Not so in the Olympic track events. In these races, time is almost irrelevant. Your only goal is to win the race. If you can win in a slow time – that's fine.

In order to win, you have to beat your opponents, either mentally or physically. So, particularly in events 400m or longer, every coach hammers this point into his athletes' heads: Your goal is to make the race develop in such a way that others can't catch you, or to make the race develop in such a way that those who *can* catch you *think* they can't.

A classic example of this took place 54 years ago this week, in the 1954 Commonwealth Games "Miracle Mile." The Englishman Roger Bannister had run history's first sub-four minute mile on May 6. The Australian John Landy broke that World Record six weeks later. No one else had broken the barrier. About seven weeks after Landy's record race, the two runners met for the first and only time. Bannister was known for his fast kick. So Landy calculated that his best chance to win was to break contact early, to go out so hard that Bannister would think he was unable to come back.

That's what Landy did. He pushed hard from the beginning. By halfway, he had a 10 yard lead. But Bannister still believed in himself. He still believed he could come back. As he wrote later, describing the race:

I quickened my stride, trying at the same time to stay relaxed. I won back the first yard, then each succeeding yard, until his lead was halved by the time we reached the back straight on the third lap. . . . I had now connected myself to Landy again, though he was still 5 yards ahead. . . . I tried to imagine myself attached to him by some invisible cord. With each stride I drew the cord tighter, and reduced his lead. . . . I fixed myself to Landy like a shadow.

Bannister remained focused. Then, with 80 yards to go, he pulled up outside Landy. At this point, Landy made an uncharacteristic mistake. With all the crowd noise, he hadn't sensed Bannister on his outside. He turned his head inward, to the left, just when Bannister kicked. He lost a stride – and now *he* was the one who thought he could not catch the other. And he didn't.

Bannister won. Both ran under four minutes - but Bannister won.

The last two Sundays we've looked at running analogies in Scripture that relate to training: We've highlighted these lessons:

- Know who you are.
- Be disciplined.
- Be consistent.
- Train through pain.
- Yet know when not to run.
- Enjoy the training, as you fulfill who you are.

Today and during the next two Sundays, we look at biblical analogies with racing. The Bannister/Landy race exemplifies two key lessons for our spiritual lives:

- Stay alert – like Landy failed to do
- Stay focused – like Bannister did.

Our primary text for today is found in Hebrews 12. The previous chapter walks thru Old Testament history, reminding us of men and women who exercised faith in God. Some, through faith, had great earthly success; others, through faith, remained true to God in the midst of terrible persecution. Hear the description that begins in verse 36:

36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37 They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword.

They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. 40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:36-40)

So get the picture: All these men and women who endured through faith are waiting for the fulfillment of the promise: The gathering of all God's people from all time into one worshiping body. And they, as it were, are in the stands, watching, cheering, telling us of God's faithfulness to them – as we run our race. This is the image in the next two verses, today's text:

Since we have such a great cloud of witnesses around us, setting aside everything that weighs us down and the sin that so easily entangles us, we must run with endurance the race set before us, by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, thinking nothing of its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We'll look at this under three headings:

- Stay alert
- Stay alert but maintain focus
- Focus on Christ

Stay Alert

Landy needed to know where Bannister was **without** looking around. He needed to sense his approach. He needed to stay alert. He wasn't – and thus wasn't ready for Bannister's big move.

We too are in a race where others are trying to keep us from winning. Our enemies are not flesh and blood; and their desire is to do much worse to us than beat us into 2nd place. So the Bible tells us to be alert:.

We see this instruction several places in Scripture:

- Mark 13, which we read during the service, tells us to be alert as we wait for Christ's return, to be alert in discerning false Christs, to be alert concerning false ends of history, and to be alert for persecution.
- 1 Peter 5:8: Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.
- Galatians 5:7 uses a running image, implying that we need to be alert to such moves: *You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?*

Question: What's the difference between this lesson – to be alert – and the lessons we've discussed in previous weeks: Be disciplined, be consistent?

Think in this way: When we strive to be disciplined and consistent, we are fighting besetting sins, sins that are always there, such as laziness, dullness of mind, and lack of passion. That's the equivalent of daily discipline in training.

What's the equivalent of being alert in a race? Dealing with the unexpected. In a race you face surprises. For example, someone cuts in on you. How do you react?

Just so in Christian life. What does Satan throw at you unexpectedly? What unusual outside pressures? What surprising temptations?

These are the events that are analogous to being cut off, or an opponent surprising you with a big move early in the race.

So in this light consider the two warnings in Hebrew 12:1. First: "setting aside everything that weighs us down."

The lesson: *Be alert to what might weigh you down.*

On race day, what might slow you down unexpectedly?

As a runner, there are many possibilities: Wind, heat, humidity, rain, hail, snow, a bad track, hills, sharp turns, stomach cramps. For those competing in Beijing: Pollution. You must be alert. Be ready. Be confident, no matter what the conditions might be.

What weighs you down in the race of faith? Consider this category as those unexpected challenges that are not sinful in themselves, but keep you from doing well in the race.

Challenges such as:

- A surprising illness or disability (I think here of someone like Joni Erickson Tada, who as a healthy, athletic teen was paralyzed for the rest of her life in a diving accident.)
- Unexpected persecution: Anything from imprisonment and torture to friend or relative who ends our relationship because of our faith.
- Unexpected failure or falling into sin by a person you respect.
- This category also includes anything else which is just part of your life, but, surprisingly, you now see is hindering your race of faith. This could be a hobby –

even running or another sport. It could be music, or reading, or politics.

The message: Be alert! Notice the hindrances! Be sensitive to what is keeping you from advancing in the faith!

Ask yourself: What is surprisingly keeping me from racing well? Then be alert! Deal with the surprises! Get rid of every hindrance!

Hebrews 12:1 continues: "Setting aside everything that weighs us down, and the sin that so easily entangles"

So the second lesson: *Be alert to what might trip you – the sin that so easily entangles.*

This corresponds to temptations to sin that weren't there before. Your enemy prowls around, looking for any crack, any opening. Do you remember when Satan tempted Jesus? At the conclusion of Luke's account, he says that Satan "departed from him until an opportune time." (Luke 4:13) Satan sometimes withdraws temptations when you are fighting successfully. He returns at an unexpected time, hoping that your guard will be down. He always aims to entangle us, to trip us up, to get us out of the race. He sometimes uses a temptation we never faced before. He sometimes uses a temptation to a sin we thought we had conquered in the past: anger, lust, gossip.

Fundamentally: Satan aims to make us fall into the sin of unbelief. He tries to make us too frightened to take a step of faith. He tells us, "Don't trust God. Don't believe His promises."

Stay alert in these areas. Know your opponent is active. He is trying to catch you off guard. He is trying to destroy your faith, to make faith look frightening. Stay alert.

Stay Alert but Maintain Focus and Confidence

While alert to all these potential dangers, we must keep our *focus* elsewhere. When warned to stay alert, there is a danger that the runner will focus on the potential dangers. He may think of all that can go wrong, then begin to worry, and consequently to lose confidence. He starts trying to AVOID having things go wrong, instead of trying to win the race.

Every runner must remember: The goal is NOT to avoid being tripped. The goal is to win. The hurdler who focuses on the hurdles will never win the race.

Just so for us in the race of faith: The goal is NOT to avoid sin. The goal is to follow Christ.

We too can get so wrapped up in avoiding sin, or thinking about unexpected barriers to faith, that we lose focus on what is most important. In some measure, this was the problem of the Pharisees. They focused so completely on avoiding sin, that they lost sight of the greatest commandment: Loving God, delighting in Him.

So, yes, we must be alert to surprises, to potential dangers. But of greatest importance: We must run the race set before us with endurance, focusing on Christ.

Focus on Christ

In racing, this is what Bannister did so well in the Miracle Mile. Landy, through going out hard, tried to get Bannister to lose focus – but he never did. He focused on Landy's back; he imagined a string connecting them; and he pulled Landy in closer and closer.

This is a key point in today's text: "We must run with endurance the race set before us by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus." "Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus" explains HOW we can run the race with endurance. We're not going to run it any other way.

We've spoken of running the race of faith as a distance race, as marathon; because of the element of time and of strategy, that's usually the most appropriate running analogy. But these phrases in Hebrews 12 also relate to a sprint.

As the race starts, you can see finish line. Your task is to reach that finish line before your opponents. You do that, in part, by looking straight ahead. You never look at your opponents; you never look up in the stands. To do so will twist your body slightly – and every twist in your body will shorten your stride, thus slowing you down. You focus only on the finish, until you run through the tape.

Just so in the race of faith. Jesus Himself is finish line. Keep your eyes fixed on HIM. Never take your eyes off Him. Be alert to what is around you and in you; be aware of your stride pattern, of your arm carriage, of relaxing your jaw and shoulders; be aware of any unevenness or holes in the track; be aware of any lane violations by your opponents; yes, be alert. BUT remain focused on the finish line, on Jesus, and on Him alone.

What exactly about Jesus are we to focus on?

Three aspects of who Jesus is come out in this passage:

First: He is our Joy

Just as Jesus "for the joy set before Him endured the cross, thinking nothing of its shame", so we run the race with endurance, looking at the joy set before us. And that joy set before us is Jesus Himself.

What was the joy set before Christ? He knew the purpose of the cross. He knew God created man for His glory, yet mankind from the beginning had rebelled against that purpose, had pretended that they were not under God's authority. All mankind, therefore, was under God's just condemnation. But Jesus went to the cross to pay the penalty for man's sin. He lived a perfect life. He therefore did not deserve death. He did not deserve God's wrath. So when he died, He took on Himself the punishment for all the sins of all who would trust in Him. He knew, therefore, that at the cross He was glorifying God through the redemption of people every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. With that joy in mind, He endured unimaginable punishment for sin not His own. It was all worth it! He knew it. So he endured.

Just so with us. We too have joy set before us: Jesus Himself. We will see Him face to face. He will look at us and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." We will know Him as we are known.

By focusing on that joy – we can endure. Jesus is our joy

Second: He has all power to help us complete the race of faith

Verse 2 tells us He is the founder of our faith. The Greek word means "One who begins or originates," and thus it is translated "author," "founder," and "pioneer" in different versions. This word emphasizes that He *gave you* the gift of faith.

- He is the one who replaced your heart of stone with a heart of flesh so that you might love Him.

- He is the one who opens the eyes of your heart so you might see Him for who He is.
- He is the one who gives you faith as a gift.
- He is also perfect example of man of faith: Trusting God every minute of every day.

Furthermore, He who began a good work in you will complete it. That's what the author of Hebrews says next: Jesus is the **perfecter** of our faith. That is, the one who will bring it to perfection, the one who will complete it. If your faith is brought to perfection – it can't be improved any more! And if He is going to do it – then that outcome is certain!

Now look at the last phrase in verse 2: He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. That is: He is God the Father's right hand man. There is no higher power. Nothing else can approach such a power. So He will ensure that you complete the race of faith.

Finally, focus on Jesus' return

This is in part what the author of Hebrews refers to at the end of chapter 11: "Apart from us [the faithful saints of old] should not be made perfect." Jesus will come to perfect His bride, the church, as He unites into one body believers from every age. Indeed, He comes to renew and to restore the entire creation. As we read in Mark 13:

Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory.²⁷ "And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven." (Mark 13:26-27)

Jesus is coming back. And when He comes He will gather His people, wherever they are. All is pointing to this final act of history. All will be summed up in Christ. His return makes all the pain, all the sorrow, all the suffering worthwhile. He will right all wrongs, and establish the perfected new heavens and new earth.

So Focus on Jesus. Yes, be alert to potential problems. Don't be caught off guard by Satan's attempts to box us in, to cut us off, to hinder our running. But don't focus on those problems. Instead: Look to Him – our joy, our power, the one who will return. And as you look: Gain confidence: He IS returning; He IS almighty; He IS our supreme joy.

Conclusion:

So how are you running the race?

Are you alert?

I encourage you: Take time this week to sit down by yourself and consider:

Am I running the race of faith? If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, if He is not your supreme joy – then repent. Turn to Him. He can be all we have described: Your joy, your power, the returning king. He will return: And will that be your greatest joy or your greatest sorrow? Turn to Him in faith – and then run the race set before you, fixing your eyes on Jesus, your joy.

If you are running the race – if you believe in Jesus – ask yourself:

- What is hindering me in the race of faith?
- What changes do I need to make in my life?
- What may have been fine and good a year ago, but now is slowing my progress?
- What sins have I overcome? Am I taking those victories for granted? How can I continue to guard myself?
- Am I alert, ready for the unexpected?

- Am I digging deeply into the Word, so when the unexpected comes, I can respond?

Get specific. Ask yourself:

- What is keeping me from being a husband who loves his wife as Christ loves the church?
- What is keeping me from being a wife who respects, honors, and submits to her husband?
- What is keeping me from being a parent or child or employee or friend or student who honors Christ in all I do?
- What keeps me from being an effective witness to my friends and family?

Be biblical. Throw off sins. Throw off other activities that hinder you – and then run to Jesus, like the wind.

Remember the beginning of Hebrews 12: “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.” Consider now our forbearers in the faith:

- The OT saints author of Hebrews mentions
- The Apostles
- The early Christian leaders, such as Timothy and Silas
- Our faithful brothers and sisters over the centuries: Clement, Augustine, Athanasius, Anselm, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Martin Luther, William Tyndale, John Calvin, John Owen, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Ann Judson, Gladys Aylward, Elizabeth Prentiss, Amy Carmichael;

Consider these and millions more, most you’ve never heard of, but all of whom ran with endurance the race of faith, by keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus.

And they now surround you, they are on the sidelines of your marathon race, calling out to you, “Come on, Amber. Go, David. That’s the way, Rohan! Keep looking at Jesus! We know it’s hard – Hey, we were worn in two. We wandered around destitute. Others of us battled the temptations that come with success. But we all completed the race of faith by God’s grace – so can you! Throw off all those hindrances! Get rid of that entangling sin! Look to your loving Savior! And run that race to win!”

They have done it. They encourage you to do it.

And Jesus Himself is both is the supreme example of faith and the reliable supplier of faith.

So look to Jesus, your joy.

Look to Jesus, the one with all power.

Look to Jesus – the returning King!

Look to Him – and run to win.

The Roger Bannister quote is from p. 192-194 of his book, *the Four-Minute Mile*, originally published in 1955; the current 2004 edition is published by Globe Pequot.

Copyright © 2008, Thomas C. Pinckney. This data file is the sole property of Thomas C. Pinckney. Please feel free to copy it in written form, but only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice.

This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, posted on the internet, copied for resale or incorporated in any products offered for sale, without the written permission of Thomas C. Pinckney, www.desiringGODchurch.org, c/o Desiring God Community Church, PO Box 620099, Charlotte, NC 28262.