

## “Don’t Look Back”

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*Faith in Film* series – “Overcomer” – Season of Epiphany

I’m not a runner. I don’t mind jogging, but I’ve never been fast. I’ve never loved running for running’s sake, but I do enjoy the benefit and feeling of a good cardio workout. But I’m not a runner.

So it was interesting to watch my kids take on cross country in middle school. The good thing is that anyone can do it. Each runner runs his or her own race. It’s not incredibly competitive because you’re really running against yourself. Can you run your best race? Can you improve your time? Can you see the benefits for yourself?

I also noticed the encouragement that runners received from each other and their coaches. Now that’s a coach’s role, of course, but it’s amazing to see middle school kids and parents cheering on runners as they take each stride. Probably the most powerful thing I noticed was the perseverance of kids finishing the race. For some, it took less time than others, but the need to persevere was clear.

Running the race of faith is a powerful image in New Testament letters. The writer of Hebrews brings it all together after that long list of those who have lived and died by faith. Now the call to this new Christian community is to remember this cloud of witnesses as they prepare themselves for and run the race of faith. The community who received these encouraging words needed to hear them. They knew struggle and loneliness.

Some wanted to abandon the faith or leave the community. We hear in these verses this encouraging word, urging the faithful to “keep on keepin’ on” amid all that they’re experiencing. And these words are still meaningful – even right now as we consider what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Rose Taylor writes, “Christians are identified in Christ by wearing his name. However, our identity in Christ is not in name only. Our identity in Christ is reflected in the way we live our lives, the service we offer and the love we express for others.” This is a not a call to a sedentary lifestyle that doesn’t require anything of us, but a call to keep moving.

*Overcomer* is a faith-based movie, and I was challenged by the character of Thomas Hill, a man dealing with his own illness, his past, and his seeking to live his faith in Jesus. He asks John Harrison, who meets him by accident and forms a friendship with him, hard questions. Thomas wants to know if John’s faith is really authentic. “You said you’d pray for me. Did you?”

Thomas also invites John to search his heart and consider his identity. He asks an important question: **SHOW SLIDE** *What do you allow to define you?* And it’s a question

for everyone to answer. How do we see ourselves? Most of the time, we don't start a conversation with someone we've just met by telling them about our faith. We don't start with, "Hi, my name's Mary, and I'm a follower of Jesus." We talk about other things – family, work, or something else. Thomas' challenge is a powerful one: **SHOW SLIDE** *When you find your identity in the One who created you, it will change your whole perspective.*

And that's really the goal for the characters in the film, especially young Hannah, who is searching for something. It's really the message for all of us, too – that we claim our identity in Christ. And that's word that Paul has for the Ephesians. The letter starts with a reminder of God's work to save us: "By grace you have been saved through faith. It is a gift of God so that no one can boast." God forgives us and lets us start over. Grace really is a free gift that we receive. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it, but God is full of mercy and love – and gives it to us, which we can receive in faith. And Paul goes on to say that each of us a work of art because of what God is doing in us and through us.

One other message from the film is that our past doesn't define us. Our past can inform us, to be sure, but it doesn't have to define us. When we receive God's grace in faith and follow Jesus, we're called to keep on looking forward. **SHOW SLIDE** *You can't let the past slow you down.* Don't look back. Don't give up. Remember God's grace.

Runner Erick Rheam offers fundamental reasons that you should never look back. They apply to running and to life. "First, looking back breaks up your momentum and deteriorates your form. Running, like life, is all about efficiency. Extraneous movement takes energy and creates "drag" in your form. When you break your form to turn your head and upper body around to see who is behind you, you sacrifice efficiency. In life, it is never good to obsess on what is behind you and reflect on the past too much, because you lose focus on the present and what lies ahead."

Second, looking back puts you in the wrong mindset. "When you allow yourself to look over your shoulder you're giving yourself permission to take your mind off your goal, which will put you in danger of getting off track. How often do you find yourself getting off track at work or at home? It happens to us often. So the key is: Don't look back.

Third, looking back undermines our confidence. We can give too much time to the voice in your head that says "you're not good enough for the goal you have set." Don't look back. Don't give up. Remember God's grace.

So back to Hebrews. We're encouraged to do what it takes to be faithful to Jesus Christ. If we want to run the race well, there are some things we have to do. Like anything else, there is a cost and benefit. When we accept God's love for us, we seek to

be holy. We seek to be righteous. It requires discipline, and difficulty isn't an excuse. It's a given. And we'd be dishonest if we said that being faithful is easy. Remember the fruit of the Spirit? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - they're not always easy to cultivate.

Living our commitment calls us to act, but what's interesting is that the writer addresses the whole community: "let us" do these things. First, throw off what hinders and get rid of sin that tangles us up! Imagine trying to run with layers and layers of clothing on. Think about the image of Ralphie's little brother in *A Christmas Story*.

Trying to move with layers and layers on doesn't work! There's a huge market for the right kind of clothing for runners that makes running easier and lightweight running shoes. This is literally a call to strip down – get rid of distractions – in order to keep the pace and run well.

And certainly sin – whatever separates us from God - weighs us down and can take us off course. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ and recognize our need for new life in him, we know the power that sin has to destroy us and others. We cannot overcome sin on our own; we need God's grace that is greater than our sin. But when we know that power, then we want to get rid of sin in our lives. By grace we have been saved through faith: don't look back...don't give up...remember God's grace.

So, we throw off whatever hinders us. Second, we're called to run with perseverance the race marked for us. So, it's not just running the race; it's running with perseverance. Perseverance shows up in many letters to the early church. And it's usually a positive characteristic that's inextricably tied to faith. In a world where we don't have to wait for much, where getting something fast is sometimes more important than getting something of good quality, the ability to stick with something over the long haul runs counter to culture. This is a call to be active, not passive. There is no such thing as passive faith.

And it's not running someone else's race; it's running our race. But we run alongside one another. There's so much power in the community of faith, in the fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ! I've noticed it how we pray for each other and help each other. I felt it this week as I sat in the waiting room at the hospital with my mom as my sister had surgery. Your prayers were a blessing to me. And in the words of Dave Lorenz: "Prayers work – really."

How many of us do well exercising alone? I don't! I need to be accountable to someone. When I was in college, I wouldn't have been out of bed at 6:00 a.m. without my roommate there to go to rec center with me. In seminary, I wouldn't have taken a 10:00 p.m. walk every night without the small group that met outside our dorm. We need encouragement! We need each other to keep on moving forward in faith. We

need to hear how God is working in each other's lives! It's vital for us to be together in worship, in study, in fellowship, and in life together!

We run with the hope that others will see God working when we struggle with illness, financial stress, unemployment or career change, struggles in relationships, death, and grief. I saw that in my sister who was absolutely clear about the power of prayer in her life as we faced surgery. We run with the hope that others will see God's glory when we overcome sin, when we celebrate blessings, when we grow in faith.

So, throwing off what hinders us and running our own race with perseverance. Third, we're called to fix our eyes on Jesus. It doesn't say "look at Jesus." It says "fix our eyes" on him: pioneer, perfecter, author, completer of our faith. Keep him in our view all the time. It's not just about how we're doing, but we also keep our eyes on him and allow him to set the pace. It's a powerful image - Jesus as pacesetter in this race we're in. More than powerful, it's challenging and provocative. If Jesus is the pacesetter, than how am I doing? Don't look back. Don't give up. Remember God's grace.

As we consider living our faith in Jesus Christ, the writer of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus showed perseverance and endurance to the utmost degree. When we consider what Jesus endured for our sake and for the sake of the whole world, I feel overwhelmed and amazed at God's love for me.

But it's easy for us to lose focus on the amazing love of God and lose hope. We forget what God has done for us in Jesus. We forget that Jesus endured the cross for us and that he has freed us from the sin that weighs us down. We can run the race, knowing that the call to sacrifice and selflessness is real, knowing that resurrection is real, knowing that he has run the race, reigns with God, and guides us at each step.

Certainly we face suffering in this life, and I don't have answers for much of it, but when we consider that Jesus knows our feelings and understands our troubles, we find strength. We take courage. When we remember Jesus' words and promise, we can keep going forward and not look back. **SHOW SLIDE** John 16: 33 (NIV) "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Don't look back. Don't give up. Remember God's grace.

In your bulletin, you have a copy of the creed – a statement of faith – that Hannah wrote after she read from Ephesians. It's the message that Paul wanted them to hear. It's a message that Hannah claims in the film. It's a message for us to claim, too. **SHOW SLIDE** Hannah's creed

*I am blessed.*

*I am chosen.*

*I am adopted.*

*I am redeemed.*

*I am forgiven.*

*I am sealed.*

*I am loved.*

*I am saved.*

*I am God's child.*

How would it be for us to say these words every day - to claim who we are by God's grace? How much different would our perspective be - how much could it change for the better? Don't look back. Don't give up. Remember God's grace.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...