

“Setting the Pace”

Devotions for the Runner by Tom Bishop



Sunday, August 30, 2009

Looking for that Elusive Finish Line

I found myself standing on the side of a high-school cross country course this past weekend. I had flashbacks to the many years I had once ran on a course with the same smell of grass and the beginnings of Fall, the yelling of parents and coaches, the faces which sometimes reflected a sense of accomplishment, at other times feelings of disappointment, pain, and regret. After the race, there were the usual interactions of those asking runners how they felt, anything they would do different, or any regrets.

One particular young man reminded me of so much. In his case, he had even expected things to go badly before the starter had even pulled the starting gun out to begin the race. You guess it; he found what he was looking for, with his race not going very well. He shared how he felt that he let everyone down; he disappointed everyone, that he lacked confidence. He could no longer see what others knew of him. If you had asked coaches, parents, and fellow runners, they would talk of his strong work effort, endurance, high self-standards, greater experience than most runners, and strong sense of conviction. For some reason, this young man could no longer see this person.

While it may seem that we are simply reflecting on a young man, running along a path, on a warm day with probably four hundred other young men looking for that elusive finish line, I believe that this experience is something all can relate too. We feel called by God to first know His son, then to serve, and to walk with Him closely. We try so hard to get it just right, attempt to control how it should be done, and perhaps even the outcomes. In the process, we forget what was our “first love,” why we had come to Him, to serve, and to simply walk with Him. We experience pressure, disappointment, and perhaps no longer have the confidence we may have had. We can no longer see how God sees us – that He loves and that we do not have to work at “being good enough.”

That is not to say that we do not have a job. I was also reminded this past weekend by another young man that it takes discipline, practice, and the fortitude to push beyond pain. Another runner running along the path, stopped frequently, making complaints that did not appear to be consistent with his level of fitness, and tended to do this when others were watching. Running the race does take preparation, commitment, conviction, and courage to reach beyond personal pain. In essence, it takes a faith that there is something beyond one’s self, that the race can be accomplished, and a willingness to lean upon a conviction that is bigger than one’s limited vision.

I had shared Psalm 40 during a devotion one day before a run where there were comments of fatigue, some despair, and frustration. David shares how he waits upon God, how God had lifted him up, and put a “new song” in him – a song of praise and the willingness to trust the Lord completely.

I waited patiently for the Lord; And He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay; And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear, And will trust in the Lord (Psalm 40, NAST).

The challenge before us during our race is to find and keep within us a song of praise, self sacrifice, and trust. Can we worship Him in such a way that our spirit sings, even during times of trouble, frustration, and fatigue? Preventing ourselves from getting in the way of becoming what He desires and to see our selves through His eyes. Can we follow His lead in working together, encouraging each other, and pushing each other toward that true elusive finish line?

Thursday, May 28, 2009

I Am Not Alone! Singing Praises and Moving Up

I was talking with my son the other day when he shared how he wished that there was a way to “think through the pain” when running. And in many ways, to do the same through many of life’s difficult moments or when one feels out of control. When considering this further, it is likely that our minds are what get in the way – tending to “over think” things, finding it difficult to let go, or in fact attempting to keep the control. Not allowing us to dream, consider the possibility, see the hope in situations, or to really be free in leaning upon God for strength and success. We are reminded in Psalms that it is not the “thinking” that is critical, it is the “Praising” that is important. Many Psalms, particularly those written by David, begin with an acceptance of being defeated without God, and then leading into incredible praise. Praise that seems to come reaching out from the deepest part of who we are.

Psalm 40 in particular reminds me of how a friend in College shared how he knew that he was remaining close to God, since he had a constant song in his thoughts.

“I waited patiently for the Lord; And He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay; And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear, And will trust in the Lord” NAST

May this Psalm push us all in learning how to truly praise through the pain, and perhaps leave our minds behind, finding a rhythm to run, walk, and live by.

Thursday, May 21, 2009

Lost in the Trying

It is Sunday evening again, and perhaps like most, I find myself thinking about the week's schedule. There is time where I must be at work, a number of activities where I will need to attend so that I can yell and cheer on my children, church and community meetings, and of course I need to find time for my wife in between. This list is incomplete without quiet times for God and the daily ritual of a run or workout. It seems that the older I become, the more days seem to become a never ending "treadmill." It is easy to become obsessed on making sure it all fits in, including the important run so that I do not "loose anything." Surely I am not the only one who has had this thought?

I have known many accomplished athletes, and perhaps even more who are not so accomplished, but passionate and driven anyway, who speak of their obsession to make sure that they keep the treadmill going. We may talk of faith, dependence, and trust, but in fact we lean more on what we do, need to do, or believe that we should do.

Paul challenges us in describing how the Law is weak, that it is the Holy Spirit in a life that brings freedom – we no longer have to live in a "mechanical sense" of trying to do the right things. We no longer have to be dependent solely upon our flesh.

"Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them – living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God....So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. Go's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go." (Message – Rom 8)

Perhaps we could become more obsessed with knowing and serving God so deeply that we no longer settle for our flesh.

Thursday, May 14, 2009

Where Is Your Goal? What Is Your Prize?

Three to four years ago, you would think that I would remember better, I found myself at about the sixteenth mile of the Boston Marathon. I had been training for months with some of my closest friends, and was very excited to be in Boston for such an amazing race that has a rich history. It had been my goal since I ran in High School to some day be running into the city of Boston. It was at that part of the race that I began to tire and second guess how important it was "really" to keep the pace, or simply stop, walk some, and finish in what ever time it took. I thought to myself that it would not "really" matter in how I finished. I know that this is typical of marathons – "hitting the wall" – but it did become disconcerting to me that I was no longer invested full throttle toward the goal that I had for so many months, and in many ways, for so many years.

I found myself praying and thinking, and eventually decided that I would simply do my part, and if God was in it, He would have to bring me in to the finish. I began to find new energy and purpose. The last six miles were very much a blur. I did not even see the infamous “landmarks” that are often talked about amongst those who have set their eye upon the Boston Marathon.

This experience, perhaps in only a small way, reflects some of what Paul was saying in Philippians, Chapter 3. Paul begins to outline what is the true “prize.” The knowledge of Jesus Christ, that we have fellowship in His death and resurrection. That there is life in His death, and that we are not to waver in any way from the goal of seeking to know Him, live for Him, and to be sold out for Him – “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (vs. 13 & 14). What Paul was referring in regards to what he left behind, was both success as well as failures. He was focused on a life with Christ, not even imagining any other thing.

We find in the message it written this way:

“I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward – to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.

So let’s keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision – you’ll see it yet! Now that we’re on the right track, let’s stay on it.

Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them.”

It was at mile 16, and likely 17, 18, and maybe 19, that I decided to place aside my own thoughts, doubts, and previous notions of what Boston was going to be like. I was no longer going to seek my idea of prize, and allow my pace, thoughts, and sense of what I could accomplish at the finish line that day to be in God’s hands. After all, this life as a whole, is “God’s Race.”

Thursday, May 7, 2009

Always Looking Rather Than Just Being

Have you ever found yourself at the beginning of a run with others, at work with co-workers, or perhaps even with friends when you find yourself comparing yourself. You know, you take out the “measuring stick” – what ever it may be, and attempt to see if you “measure up.” If I was just faster, or could run longer, be smarter, look better, or have more of.... It is easy being lulled into thinking about ourselves in comparison to others.

I have seen individuals become so caught up in this path, they truly feel lost, insecure, wandering about. That is also to say that, perhaps, all of us at times also fall into this trap. It is easy standing and looking

about with feelings of inadequacy, lacking confidence, or pretending to be confident. Thinking about what we must be doing wrong.

I often find myself looking about at the beginning of marathons, amazed at the variety of folks standing about, ready to run the race. They seem to come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. In various ability with differing backgrounds and abilities. It is not necessarily the most “fit looking” that end up the most capable, or the most apparently “out of shape” person that ends up at the back. I have come to realize that we have all been placed in the “race” with what we have, doing what we are able, and having the faith and belief that it will work out.

Paul says something like this in Romans when he calls us to simply place our lives before God as a sacrifice, a form of worship, to be conformed to Him in a manner that *proves* who He is and what He does. We are not to be so prideful that we know better than God of what we are to be or should be – but too simply to live out the gifts He has given us to “run the race” with as much faith and trust as we can. Not to be anything more.

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.....Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it’s important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.” (Message – Rom 12)

May we all find who we are in God and who He is – not by what we think we are or are not today.

Saturday, May 2, 2009

It’s a Team Sport

It would be easy to overlook that running is in fact a “team sport,” given that we likely each have different goals, talents, ambitions, and reasons for running. However, you only have to run along side someone to experience how each tends to encourage, push, and inspire the other, often without saying a word. Simply running along the same path and in the same direction can create a sort of “oneness” in what is achieved. It is as if the momentum of each runner strengthens the pace of the whole group together. We become carried along by the efforts of the group.

Paul reminds us of this when he writes to the church of Ephesus regarding how true believers should live the Christian life, and more specifically in chapter four of how we are to treat each other. He asks believers to promote unity in the church through godly living, realizing that there is a bond that transcends us as individuals and causes us to strive beyond our own sense of self. It is because we have

been called by God and filled with the spirit that we can work toward harmony, not reaching solely for our own needs and ambitions. We are truly demonstrating the church by seeking commonality in our desires to know God, to serve Him, and to care for one another. In the *Message* translation we find Paul saying:

“In light of all this, here’s what I want you to do. While I’m locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk – better yet, run! – on the road God called you to travel. I don’t want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don’t want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline – not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences.

You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly, You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, and God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.”

May our coming together, what we share, and the time we spend, be an encouragement of building the unity of the church, inspiring others to find Christ, and cause us all to press on in growing in the spirit.