

“Olympic Faith”

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:3

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days. 31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37 They were stoned; (and we aren't talking about drugs); 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.

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Run, Rosa, run. Rosa Gutierrez spent most of her life on the run, running hard in competitive races such as the Stockton 10-mile, the Gasparilla 15k, and the Rotary Mission Ten. She usually runs between 80 and 90 miles a week, plus regular swimming and weight training and she was able to cover long distances at the impressive pace of six minutes per mile. This is what she did to prepare for the 2004 Olympic games marathon. [NOTE 1]

Throughout her training, Rosa kept today's passage from Hebrews chapter 12 in mind: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (12:1).

When Rosa runs, she remembers the men and women of faith who have gone before her, including her mother and her father. They moved from Mexico to the United States with nothing in their pockets but managed to raise 11 children and live good and faithful lives. They are, for Rosa, witnesses of what it means to overcome life's obstacles by faith and trust in God. They have helped her to see that when the race is tough and everything seems to be falling apart, there is still something within her that is strengthening her, encouraging her, and calling her to persevere. That's why Rosa is dreaming of something besides gold medals and personal glory. Her highest aspirations are spiritual growth, drawing others to Jesus Christ, and the glorification of God in everything she does. **[NOTE 2]**

For Rosa, the race of faith is even more important than the Olympic marathon. "Whatever the outcome, God will be in the midst of it all," she predicts. That's Olympic faith.

The 2004 Olympics marked the return of the Olympic Games to the land of their birth, Greece. Throughout those games, the core values of the Olympics were highlighted, values such as unity, solidarity, peace, and friendship. To this list, we might add "faith," because faith is what allows each of us, in a well-conditioned body of Christ, to run with perseverance "The race that is set before us." But we're talking about the race of life here. You are in the race of your life. If you don't focus on Jesus and get rid of the sin and weight that so easily entangles, you'll never make it to the end. **[NOTE 3]**

Hebrews tells us that faith is what enabled the people of God to pass through the Red Sea, take down the walls of Jericho, conquer kingdoms, administer justice, obtain promises, shut the mouths of lions, quench raging fire, escape the edge of the sword and put foreign armies to flight (verses 29-34).

In addition, faith was seen in the lives of people who were tortured, mocked, flogged, chained, and imprisoned. Faith was evident in folks who were stoned to death, sawn in two, and killed by the sword. Faith sustained God's people when they were destitute, persecuted, and tortured, and it set the stage for God's greatest work in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (11:35-12:2). **[NOTE 4]**

We are talking about Olympic Faith. Faith that can help us to press on toward "the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). Faith that can propel us upward when life pulls us downward; faith that helps us move forward, when stress and conflict threaten to pull us backward.

When we crash headfirst into hardship, it's important to remember that we are not alone! Just look at the field of athletes in any Olympics—there's not an

Olympian who hasn't overcome many obstacles to make it to the Games. They have faced injuries and personal failures, mental and physical challenges, financial and emotional stresses. While they may never have been tortured, mocked or flogged, they have certainly put themselves through struggle, strain, challenge and competition and now they are at a place where they are considered among the world's finest athletes.

They are surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses" a field of fellow champions, past and present. Today's competitors are moved and motivated by the athletes around them, as well as by the spirit of the Olympics, which has inspired people for thousands of years. And they are doing it for a medal, for something that is fleeting and not lasting. **[NOTE 5]**

The challenge for us, as we focus on Faith today, is to return to our roots, to embrace the people of faith who have gone before us, and to carry forward the tradition of record-breaking reliance on God. In order to achieve our personal best, we have to reach beyond ourselves. We need to attempt things that can only be accomplished if God shows up in the power of the Holy Spirit. This text from Hebrews chapters 11 and 12 is challenging us today to reach beyond ourselves, to push ourselves to accomplish much for the cause of Christ. We should be highly motivated because the things we are striving for, impact for good, the people that come into contact with us. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we can make a difference for eternity. We can point people to Jesus Christ, His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, hope, peace, and unconditional and unlimited love. That is often life-changing. **[NOTE 6]**

Olympic athletes are constantly looking beyond themselves to gain motivation, insight, and ideas from their colleagues and competitors. In the same way, we are inspired by the faith of God's people in every time and place, and we can learn from the way in which our fellow believers have dealt with hardship and suffering. Are your enemies pursuing you? Learn from the Israelites at the Red Sea. Have you run into a brick wall? Look to the Israelites at Jericho. They sought the Lord and were obedient to what He told them to do. Are you feeling mocked, abused, unfairly convicted or even crucified? Reach for Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2), who endured the cross before experiencing resurrection glory. **[NOTE 7]**

Far too often, we allow ourselves to get frustrated by a little failure and hamstrung by hardship. We fail to grasp, as marathon runner Rosa Guiteirrez has done, that even when the race is tough, our bodies are aching, and everything seems to be falling apart, there is still something within us that is strengthening us, encouraging us, and calling us to persevere. We tap into this power by faith, by a willingness to rely on God through every failure, disappointment, personal hardship or disaster. We gain access to God's strength, encouragement, and

perseverance by looking beyond our selves, by learning from the stories of faithful people, and by trusting God to help us to complete our race. Put your faith in God.

In his book, *The Millenium Matrix*, Rex Miller has focused on community as one of the key characteristics of a living church in the years to come. Looking at contemporary culture, he notices that there is an intoxicating mix of fellowship, celebration and enterprise in Harley Davidson gatherings, folk-art festivals, Grateful Dead concerts, MAC world, Bill Gaither concerts and even Mary Kay and Amway conventions. He noticed that each of these gatherings had consistently grown during the first twenty years of this century. They also have been effective because of the synergy of interaction and fellowship.

So why haven't most of our mainline churches grown in this way? Perhaps it is because we are too often agenda-driven and focused on events and Sundays. We see community as the byproduct of our gatherings. But if we reclaim the image of the church as the community of faith—the body of Christ—and come together in ways that help us to remain connected in our daily lives, then we may feel a surge of new vitality. Miller believes that in the future, many emerging congregations will begin to look like extended spiritual families, and church members will enjoy intimate and complex interaction around their common interests. I believe we are starting to get that here at Doster church. Living, moving, and acting as a healthy family.

Think of the church as an Olympic village. Extended family. Complex interaction. Common interests. Whether you are witnessing the torch relay as it crosses five continents, or watching the shot-put events, or cheering our American marathon runners along their 26.2 miles, or following archery competitions, you are entering into an international gathering that can move you and motivate you. You become part of a community that can bring you strength and encouragement, even though it gathers only once every four years. It is good but then it is all over. Rulon Jones the first American to win a gold medal in wrestling found that out and almost took his life, because all of a sudden that camaraderie, community, and encouragement was gone. With the church, that ending never has to come except in the event of death.

The church today can do the same in a much more meaningful and lasting way by maintaining its focus on faith. This faith propels us upward when the agonies of life threaten to pull us down. This faith promotes our personal best by keeping our focus outside of ourselves. Community gets short circuited when people focus too much on themselves. This faith focused outside of ourselves draws us closer to Christ and to our fellow believers and gives us the strength we need to run the race that is set before us. This is the faith of Rosa Guitierrez, as she attempts to glorify God with every step she takes. And it can be our faith as well, regardless of our place in the race.

[NOTE 8] Fellow God-followers, people of God, we are in the race of our lives. Do you want to finish? It will take faith. You must trust in the love of God. You must trust that no matter what, Jesus is always with us. In the race of life, when things get tough, God doesn't often take us out of the problem or remove the problem. In Luke 22:31 Jesus tells Peter that "Satan has asked to sift you like wheat." Now if I was Peter I would be expecting Jesus to say but I have bloodied his nose and told him right where to get off and go away. But instead, Jesus says, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." Jesus doesn't say, "I'll make life easy for you," an easy yoke doesn't necessarily mean the absence of crisis. But He will be with us always. So put aside, cut away, all that hinders you from being a fully devoted Christ-follower and fix your eyes on Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus so you can become disciple-makers in the power of the Holy Spirit who stand on the Word, walk in love, and rest in the arms of Jesus. Remember faith and focus and you will finish the race. You will get to the end of your race and Jesus, along with the great cloud of witnesses will be at the end ...applauding. **[NOTE 9]**

What does it look like to remember faith and focus? Please write down one thing that you will do this week to remember faith and focus and move your face two degrees toward God's ideal. Faith in and focus on, Jesus! Let's ask the Lord to help us live that out! Let us pray ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for “Olympic Faith” based on Hebrews 11:29-12:3
Given in Doster on April 23, 2023

- I. It is helpful to think about and learn about the people of faith that have gone before us. What does it look like to run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” (12:1)
- II. The race of faith is most important, remember that God will be in the midst of it all.”
- III. “The race that is set before us” is the race of life here. You are in the race of your life. If you don’t focus on Jesus and get rid of the sin and weight that so easily entangles, you’ll never make it to the end.
- IV. Faith can help us to press on toward “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). Faith can propel us upward when life pulls us downward; faith helps us move forward, when stress and conflict threaten to pull us backward.
- V. The faithful of the past displayed record-breaking reliance on God. In order to achieve our personal best, we have to reach beyond ourselves. We need to attempt things that can only be accomplished if God shows up in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- VI. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we can make a difference for eternity. We can point people to Jesus Christ, His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, hope, peace, and unconditional and unlimited love.
- VII. We tap into this power by faith, by a willingness to rely on God through every failure, disappointment, personal hardship or disaster. We gain access to God’s strength, encouragement, and perseverance by looking beyond our selves, by learning from the stories of faithful people, and by trusting God to help us to complete our race.
- VIII. You must trust that no matter what, Jesus is always with us. In the race of life, when things get tough, God doesn’t often take us out of the problem or remove the problem. So put aside, cut away, all that hinders you from being a fully devoted Christ-follower and fix your eyes on Jesus.
- IX. So cut away, all that hinders you from being a fully devoted Christ-follower and fix your eyes on Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus so you can become disciple-makers in the power of the Holy Spirit who stand on the Word, walk in love, and rest in the arms of Jesus. Remember faith and focus.