



Living by

FAITH

TONY EVANS



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Two men stood side-by-side on a dock one-day peering out into the broad ocean. One looked out and said, “I see a ship!” The other guy turned his gaze in the same direction and declared, “There’s no ship out there.”

“Yes there is,” the first man insisted.

“Look,” his friend countered, “I just had an eye exam. I’ve got perfect 20/20 vision and I’m telling you, I don’t see a ship.”

“Take my word for it. There is a ship.”

“How can you be so sure?” the second man asked, squinting hard as he looked out to sea.

“I see it clearly through my binoculars.”

Your Perspective

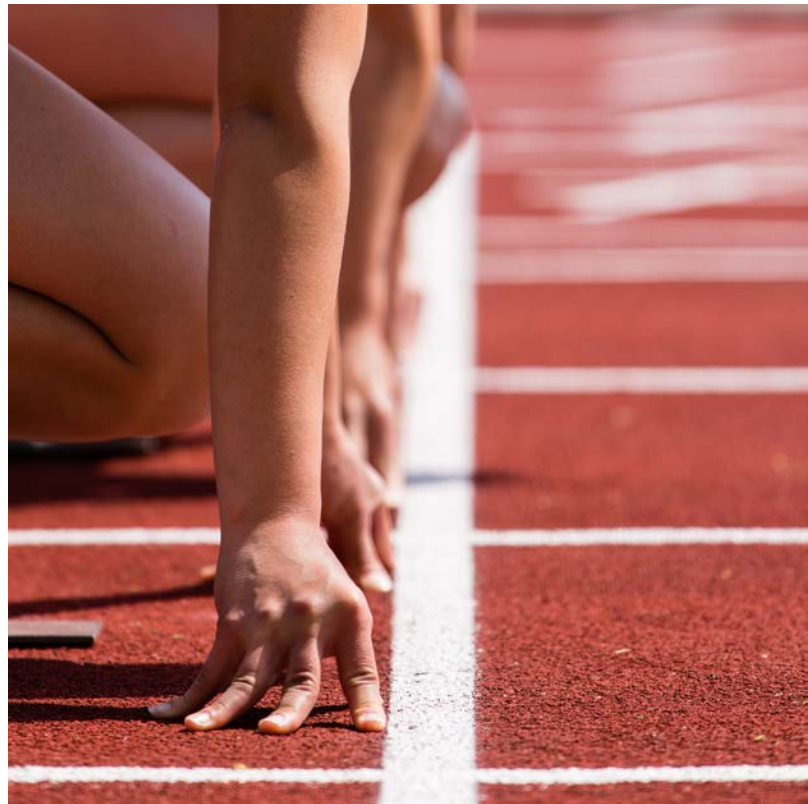
To a great degree, living a successful Christian life is a matter of perspective. The clarity of your vision can make all the difference and sharp-sightedness often depends on the focusing power of the lens you are using.

Even distant images can be brought into crystal clarity with the right optics. In the same way, if we look at our lives through the lens of Scripture, we might discover an ocean liner we failed to notice earlier. We might see death become life, disease become health, and despair become victory.

I believe that’s partially what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote his epistle. With three simple verses, he places into our hands spiritual binoculars. He tells us that if we learn to live the life of faith, we will enjoy spiritual victory in every category of our existence. If we can get a handle on the sufficiency of God—if we can comprehend the fact that

He is one step ahead of our problems and way out in front of our needs—then we can be “more than conquerors in Christ Jesus.”

In order to catch the vision of the book of Hebrews, you need your binoculars. Your unaided eyes can’t bring the image into focus. You need lenses so potent that they can focus on tomorrow and make it seem like today. Otherwise, there’s no way you can navigate through today and make it to tomorrow!



No Turning Back

The writer found himself addressing a most perplexing problem. He was faced with a congregation of people who were contemplating quitting the Christian faith. They were considering throwing in the towel because they were no longer sure that following the path was worth the pain. They thought that it might just be too uncomfortable being totally committed to Jesus.

Consequently, the book of Hebrews explains to these beleaguered believers why they can't turn back. "No matter how bad your circumstances," the text argues, "Jesus is better!" Each successive chapter examines more reasons why going back is going nowhere.

"For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

Hebrews 10:26

The writer asks, what business do Christians have with sin? Since God has already given us victory, why are we still caught in the very trap from which Jesus died to free us?



Christ died for us, what further sacrifice can there be? There is neither spiritual victory nor supernatural enablement for those who abandon their calling.

On The Other Hand

"...Since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance

the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Hebrews 12:1-2

The Race

The apostle Paul (who very well may be the author of Hebrews) was always fond of athletic analogies. I suspect that if he were alive today, he might be the type of man who believes that the news and editorial sections of the paper are only there to keep the rain off the sports section.

It is implied that one reason the Hebrews considered giving up is because they never quite grasped the fact that the Christian life is a race. And not just an ordinary race, but a marathon. A 26-mile marathon requires not only that we run, but that we run with endurance.

Anyone can run a 100-yard dash. Even a 300-pound couch potato can slog his out-of shape body 300 feet down a track. Obviously, he won't set any records-at least, not for speed. But, most likely, he will eventually cross the line.

A marathon is another story. You don't swallow your last bonbon, climb off the sofa, and hit the track. Training and conditioning are essential if you plan to finish-and perhaps even to survive.

Let me put it another way. "No pain, no gain." Without the trial of training, you can't run. Trials are like the iron you use on your clothes. It employs heat and pressure to smooth out the wrinkles.

Too many of us want to be used by God without the inconvenience of being tested by God. We want the Lord to do great things for us, not to us. It doesn't work that way. There are no shortcuts in the race of faith. We can't be like the young lady who crossed the finish line of the Boston marathon well ahead of the others... because she covered half the distance on the subway. She was, of course, disqualified. Don't let the same happen to you.

Setting Aside Encumbrances & Sin

I remember watching the pageantry with which they kicked off the most recent Olympic games. Athletes from the participating countries paraded by wearing colorful costumes and carrying flags.

When competition time came around, there was a noticeable change in wardrobe. Those jackets had been left elsewhere. Trousers were replaced with shorts. The flags had been rolled up and stored. Why? Because costumes and props don't win races.

Have you inventoried the three-piece suits, fancy dresses and expensive jewelry in your church lately? Don't misunderstand there's nothing wrong with looking nice. Sunday morning is a lot like the Olympic kickoff ceremony. But how about Monday? Are we willing to strip down to our running clothes and get down to business? Are we willing to remove the encumbrances?

An encumbrance is anything that holds you back from moving at maximum speed. Some of us have human encumbrances in our lives; we are hanging out with the wrong people. Some of us have the encumbrance of the past. Old hurts or habits keep us paralyzed, and prevent us from moving forward in our faith. Some

are encumbered by television or other forms of entertainment. We'd rather play than pray.

There's a simple scriptural prescription for dealing with encumbrances: lay them aside. The Bible doesn't say, "pray about them" or "get together with some friends and study them." We must, by an act of our will, choose to be a finely honed tool in the Master's hand and then take the steps necessary to move in that direction.

Let me call your attention to a very telling point of scripture that many of us tend to overlook. Notice that Hebrews 12:1 refers to many encumbrances, but only one sin. "*Set aside the sin...*"

Everyone reading this booklet has only one sin. Anything else that's wrong with your life can be brought back to the sin. In fact, it's the same sin—unbelief.



It's like the college student who decided to do his own laundry for the first time. He gathered all his soiled clothes and bound them up in a bed sheet. Since the whole load needed washing, he threw the entire bundle into the machine, dumped in some soap and pushed the start button. Later, when he pulled the clothes out

of the machine; he found a clean sheet surrounding some wet, dirty clothes. The clothes couldn't come clean; they were entangled in the sheet—in much the same way as many of us are entangled in sin.

Don't you know that unless you deal with unbelief, you can't fix lying? Unless you deal with unbelief, you can't fix immorality. You must decide to trust God by obeying His word. It is that obedience that leads to empowerment. Contrary to popular belief, the process will not work in reverse.

Keep the Faith



“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

Hebrews 11:6

Unlike the earthly marathons, running the Christian race is not a matter of how you move your feet, but of how you are moved by your faith. Faith is simply defined as “acting in the present in light of God's statements about the future.” Faith is taking God at His word.

Now there is passive faith and there is active faith. When you were saved, you exercised passive faith. You received the gift of God that is eternal life, you didn't cause it and you didn't create it—it already existed. You merely received it. Passive faith is enough to deliver you from hell and into heaven, but it will not enable you to live the Christian life. Doing so requires active faith—the kind of faith that accomplished something. That is why James tells us that *“faith without works is dead.”* (James 2:20) In other words, if you want the faith that made heaven your home to come down and bless you where you live and breathe today, yours must be a faith that blends belief with obedience and action.

It is by this faith, our text tells us, that the men of old gained God's approval. These men of faith are our witnesses—our “proof positive” that the life of faith can be lived successfully.

The Cloud

Often, before a major professional fight, all the past champs are paraded through the ring. While the crowd applauds wildly, each one shakes the hands of the evening's contenders.

As the likes of Sugar Ray Leonard, Smoking Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali offer their best wishes to the guys sitting in the corners, the former title holders are silently delivering an important message, “This is not the first championship fight in history. I sat in this ring once myself. Take it from me—you may leave here with a bloody nose, a bruised rib or a broken jaw. But you may also leave with a belt. I'm living proof that this contest can be won.”

Like the Hebrews to whom this epistle was addressed, some of us have been beaten and bruised—if not literally, at least figuratively. Some have spoken out for Christ only to have our jaws broken. We've been bloodied in our battle with the world. It's only natural to ask, "Can this war be won?"

The answer, of course, is a resounding "yes!" provided we fight the fight, run the race, and live the life by faith. To back up this claim, the writer of Hebrews offers proof.

Have you heard your preacher pause in the middle of a sermon and ask, "Can I get a witness?" He wants to know that his congregation is backing him in prayer and that they understand his point. When you want to find out who is backing you in your day-to-day struggles, you may want a witness as well.

Our verse tells us that you have more than a witness. You have a cloud! There's a regular storm brewing out there! "God," you may ask, "Who are these witnesses you are talking about?" The answer depends on your need.

What's Your Excuse?

Perhaps your problem is worship. Maybe your devotional life is stuck in the mud. Flip over to chapter eleven, verse three, where Abel's act of worship was honored by God—a development, which made his brother jealous enough to kill. But Abel had a testimony that could not be silenced. *"...Though he is dead, he still speaks."* (Hebrews 11:4)

Yours might be a health problem. "I'm sick," you say, "and my doctors haven't got a clue." Well, there's old Enoch in the crowd, saying, "I'm your witness!" Enoch walked so closely with God that he never tast-

ed death. Hebrews 11:5 tells us he was *"taken up."* Ask Enoch—he'll tell you that deterioration and disease have no dominion when God is in charge.



"All right, but how long must I wait for God to come through for me?" Why look— isn't that Noah stepping up to the podium? "I'm a witness!" he shouts. "God told me it was going to rain. He didn't tell me it was going to take 120 years. All I knew is that He called me to be faithful." Everyone outside Noah's immediate family thought him insane. But though the people didn't listen, the giraffes did. And so did the camels and the goats and the lions and the butterflies. Noah and his family survived, and wound up inheriting the entire world.

You say, "But you don't understand, Tony. My situation is impossible." Let me respond by introducing you to Abraham and Sarah. He was pushing 100, and she was just a decade behind him. God told them it

was time to start a family. Today, we call that family the nation of Israel. Don't talk to me about "impossible." I've got a witness from Abraham and Sarah.

You say you've been snared by temptation and have become wrapped up in worldliness? Let's have a word with Moses. Here was a man who was raised in the lap of luxury and was being groomed as the next Pharaoh of Egypt. But he chose to endure hardship with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. With his priorities in order, God used Moses to deliver an entire nation from slavery and lead them to the Promised Land.



Lest you ladies think we're leaning too far in man's direction, let's hear a word from Rahab the only person in Jericho to embrace the God of Israel. When the walls of Jericho tumbled and the city lay in ruins, just one house remained standing, and it wasn't the local Holiday Inn. But Rahab's greatest testimony is found in Matthew, chapter one, where she shows up in the genealogy of Jesus. God took this woman and made her somebody.

Fixing Your Eyes

Witnesses like the ones I've mentioned can be a great encouragement. All of these people were special, but they were still just people. Abraham was immoral. Moses disobeyed God when he killed the Egyptian, and later when he struck the stone with his staff. Rahab was a harlot. Each has a mark on his or her resume.

It is dangerous to become so intent on the illustrations that we miss the point they are intended to illustrate.

That's why our passage reminds us to *"fix our eyes upon Jesus..."* (Hebrews 12:2)

In driver training classes, instructors remind their students to "aim high." This is good advice. If you're staring at the road, trying to stay between the white lines just in front of your car, it's much harder to steer than if you look further ahead toward where you want to go. In life, we try too hard to steer between our circumstances. "Aim high," Jesus, says, keep your eyes on Him as you steer your way through life. That leaves no doubt about your destination, and tends to smooth out the road along the way.

Shall we talk about aiming high? Let's not forget that this Jesus, *"for the joy set before Him endured the cross..."* (Hebrews 12:2) Jesus knew about the cross, but He did not fixate on it. He didn't want to go, but He refused to let that fact paralyze Him. He had his sights set on Sunday morning!

It is as though He said, "On Friday, my head will be dripping with blood from the thorns they will drill into my skull. On Friday, I'm going to have a hole in my side and my bones are going to jump out of joint. On Friday, all of humanity will mock me and scorn me. On Friday, my Father will turn His back on me

as I take the sin of the world on my shoulders. So I'd better not look at Friday. Let me take a long, hard look at the joy of Sunday morning instead."

Brothers and sisters, get your eyes off Friday. I know you're bearing a cross. But I also know you have a risen Savior sitting at the right hand of the Father. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Are you still not sure that will work? All right. Let's see if I can get a witness.

Can I Get a Witness?

Peter, would you step up here and tell us whether looking at Jesus makes a difference? If the Apostle Peter were here, he would tell you about that day he walked on water. As long as he stared straight at Jesus, putting one foot in front of the other, he did just fine. But then he got distracted. Perhaps it was the storm or the waves. It could have been the shouts of the men back in the boat. Maybe he remembered something from a physics class that had to do with the density of water. Whatever it was, it was enough to change the story. He began to sink. Just as he was about to go under, he remembered to fix his eyes on Jesus. In Matthew 14:30 he cried, "*Lord, save me!*" Because Peter redirected his gaze, he lived to tell the story.

Stephen, will you testify about whether fixing your eyes on Jesus can sustain you? If Stephen were here, he would tell you that even though the Sanhedrin condemned him, he kept his eyes on Jesus. As the stones were fracturing his skull, he saw heaven open. As he looked at Jesus, he saw something more powerful than a rock!

The rest of the disciples can tell you about what looking at Jesus can do when you're crossing a stormy lake. While the waves threatened to swamp their small craft,

Jesus lay sleeping. Suspecting that they were about to die, they woke Jesus. All he said was "*Peace—be still*" (Mark 4:39.) The storm ended. Period.

How about the ten lepers? They could tell you how their flesh was disintegrating, until they looked to Jesus.

But you don't have to look to the past for a testimony to the power of God. Ask your Christian friends, ask your pastor. Ask me!



I can remember when there was no food on my table. I can recall wondering how I could continue in the ministry. There were times when we didn't have the money to pay staff salaries at The Urban Alternative. In every case, we looked to Jesus. And, in every case, we found the strength and resources to carry on. I can testify that fixing our eyes on Jesus has brought us through every single time. He helped us make it, and He will help you make it, too.

Making it to the Finish Line

A British runner named Derek Redmond competed in the 1992 Olympics. Midway through his race, he tore a ligament—a very painful injury that sent him to the ground. The rest of the pack ran on to finish the race, but poor Derek just lay there. His dreams, his hopes, and years of training collapsed along with him.



was Derek's father. Eventually, father and son crossed the line while the applause thundered throughout the stadium.

In the Christian race, it's not all that important who crosses the finish line first. What matters is that you stay on the course. Each of us stumbles from time to time. Sometimes it seems impossible to go on.

That's when our Heavenly Father steps out of the stands. Satan may come along and claim that it is unfair for God to step out on the field. But our omnipotent Lord will not be stopped. He will enfold us in His loving arms and say, "This is my child. We're going to finish this race together."

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Then, something happened that drew the attention of the crowd and the television cameras away from the winner. Derek pushed himself up off the ground, stood up on wobbly legs and began making his way around the track. He was going to finish that race.

After only a few painful strides, it was clear that running was definitely out of the question. He slowed to a walk—a slow, agonizing, tentative walk. Then a man appeared on the track. Security guards tried to deter him, but he was not to be stopped. He put his arm around Derek's shoulder and started helping him make his way toward the finish line. The TV commentators confirmed my suspicions quickly, it

