

MARATHON FAITH

*MOTIVATION from the GREATEST
ENDURANCE RUNNERS of the BIBLE*

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CONTENTS

	INTRODUCTION	xiii
1	Look Where You Want to Go—JESUS	1
2	Die Daily—ABEL	13
3	Walk with God—ENOCH	25
4	Swing that Hammer—NOAH	41
5	Better Together—ABRAHAM and SARAH	57
6	Pass the Baton—ISAAC	71
7	Fight—JACOB	83
8	Trials Possess Great Purpose—JOSEPH	95
9	Be Brave—JOCHEBED	107
10	Know Who You Are—MOSES	121
11	All In—RAHAB	131
12	Drop the Dead Weight—GIDEON	141
13	Don't Let Success Get to Your Head—BARAK	153
14	Don't Let Failure Get to Your Heart—SAMSON	163
15	Grit—JEPHTHAH	173
16	Constant Forgiveness—DAVID	183

17	Rest to Be Your Best—SAMUEL	195
18	Persevering with Prayer—DANIEL	205
19	Amigos—SHADRACH, MESHACH, and ABEDNEGO	215
20	The Finish Line—YOU	225
	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	235
	NOTES	237

INTRODUCTION

SURRENDERING YOUR LIFE to JESUS IS the BEGINNING of YOUR MARATHON LIFE of FAITH

Finishing is better than starting.

ECCLESIASTES 7:8, NLT

“I WILL NOT SWIM WITH THE SHARKS!”

My wife Stephanie faced her greatest fear lurking beneath her in the frigid, dark waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Uncomfortable and restricted by a wetsuit and paralyzed by fear on a sandy beach, she refused to start the swim section of her first triathlon. In that moment I knew I could only be successful as her coach if she trusted me, overcame her fear, and pushed onward to cross the finish line.

How will you respond when you face your greatest obstacle and everything in you screams to quit? Your life is your race. You were created to run it, but realize running the race is not easy. It isn't a sprint; it's a marathon. Finishing strong requires an attitude of tough endurance. It's not something you were born with, and it doesn't come free. Scripture doesn't say finishing requires talent, speed, good looks, a boatload of cash, or even

happiness but an attitude of tough endurance, and that endurance comes through suffering and overcoming obstacles.

I pray this book will help you discover the essentials from the endurance runners of the Bible. Did you realize the Bible mentions 3,237 different people? Of the approximately 1,300 spiritual leaders from Scripture, on average, only one in three finished well. You will learn in my favorite chapters of the Bible, Hebrews 11 and 12, that the endurance runners are not listed to cheer you on. It's what you will see in them that makes the difference in your race. None are perfect. None are better than the rest of us. Abel had sibling issues. Noah loved wine too much. Abraham lied. Jacob deceived. Moses murdered. Samson loved himself some women. David struggled with all of the above. They were jacked up and so are we. The one thing they possessed was endurance. Faith made them strong. "By faith" is listed twenty-seven times in Hebrews 11 alone.

Grit is missing today when things get tough. I believe God called me to write this book because I'm broken over those I love who quit early. It's not okay that many ministers who start well are taken out right before their breakthrough, or that students who graduate soon quit following the Lord. So many start a journey of following Jesus without a realistic expectation of the price required to finish their spiritual race. As a result, they get frustrated and lose spiritual passion for Jesus.

Anyone can toe the line, but not everyone will endure to the end. A follower of Jesus is not called to sit on the sofa and binge watch another television series. It's an endurance race. When your body is done and your emotional tank is empty, what remains? Your race will be relentless. It requires discipline, difficult training, sacrifice, the ability to suffer, and an enduring faith. Hebrews

11:1–2 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.” The endurance runners listed in this book possessed a faith certain of the reality of God. Do you have this endurance that will do whatever it takes to finish? It’s your choice. If you quit early, it’s on you. If you finish, all glory belongs to the Lord.

How can you develop endurance? How can you not quit in the face of hardship and pain? Acquiring the wisdom needed to develop endurance comes from applying the experience of others. In every chapter, you will discover a new endurance runner listed in Hebrews 11. You will be inspired by stories and practical lessons that will help you become a finisher. Unlike you, the endurance runners passed away before Jesus came and didn’t witness the fulfillment of the greatest promise. But they’re with Him now and waiting for you to join them. The great cloud is incomplete without you. To join them and finish well you must lock your eyes on our Lord Jesus Christ. He persevered through every obstacle, trial, and temptation. You can too by learning from His perfect example. You can also learn from the mistakes of others, myself included. After doing twenty-five years of ministry and finishing seventy endurance events, I discovered important principles to help you succeed.

You will fail more times than you can count, but you must get back up and continue. So much is at stake. You will face obstacles. They are the trials and temptations keeping you from finishing your race. Health problems. Relational conflict. Past failure. Shame. Marriage issues. Work problems. Financial storms. It may seem impossible to overcome. There is a real

enemy who is like a shark waiting to take you out. This enemy desires to steal, kill, and destroy you. Don't be afraid. It won't be easy. Don't raise the white flag. Never quit. You are not alone. God is for you. Never believe the lie that you don't have what it takes to finish. Discover the essentials found in Jesus and the endurance runners who've gone before you to help you reach the finish line. Jesus said in this world you will have troubles, but take heart because He has overcome the world.

This book will challenge you to last. The race begins at a new birth in Christ Jesus. It ends at the finish line when you fulfill His greatest purpose. I hope this book flips your switch. There is a prize at the finish line. It's not a medal or a first-place trophy. Those will rust and crumble. The prize at your finish line will bring you more joy than you could ever imagine. Dig deep. You are stronger than you think. Discover the courage Jesus instills in you. Find comfort in knowing you're not alone in your mistakes.

You may not have to finish everything you start, but you must finish what is most important. This book will train you to overcome common obstacles. You are living in a critical time. Now more than ever, you need to realize you can't run this race on your own. As Stephanie trusted me to be her coach, trust God to use this book as a training tool to help you overcome what you will face.

It comes down to three simple words: **FINISH YOUR RACE**. Turn the pages, and let's run it together.

“Let us run with endurance the race God has set before us”
(Hebrews 12:1).

SWING THAT HAMMER

NOAH

What God does in you, He does through you.

LIKE “SUGAR-PLUMS” THAT “DANCED IN THEIR HEADS,” A belt buckle danced in my head for three long years. It was a big, flashy, southern one, like the ones I grew up seeing in Texas. But this particular belt buckle could only be earned on a bike in Leadville, Colorado. Listed as the highest city in the United States, Leadville sits at an elevation of 10,152 feet and is nestled in a valley situated between two mountain ranges of the Rockies. Beyond its ranking as the highest city in the United States, Leadville is arguably best known for its ultramarathon races. One of those races is the Leadville Trail 100 (LT100), a one-hundred-mile, mountain-bike race, promoted as “the race of all races.” Even attracting the likes of Lance Armstrong for two years in a row, it is one of the best known, if not *the* best known, marathon events in all of mountain-bike racing. But this treacherous trail doesn’t just wind up and down through mountains; it boasts an

infamous uphill climb of over 3,000 feet to an elevation peaking at 12,424 feet.

For those of you who have never been at such a high altitude, let me tell you, it's a ruthless environment for physical exertion. The air is so thin that the lower air pressure makes it seem like there is less oxygen, causing what's known as altitude sickness. Your muscles and brain cannot function correctly at such a high altitude without proper, rigorous training. There are a dizzying number of dangerous outcomes for the unprepared.

It is a great feat just to finish. But crossing the finish line wouldn't give you the coveted belt unless you finished in under twelve hours. One hundred miles through the Rockies while feeling like you are sucking oxygen through a stir straw. Twelve hours.

Every time I look at my LT100 belt, I remember the pain and suffering. Not only on the day of the event but also throughout the three years of training leading up to it. The hard work included many lonely, hours-long rides on trails in the Texas Hill Country before daylight. I once rode over a rattlesnake and had a crash that flung my body over my handlebars on a downhill slope. Every training ride in the heat prepared me for the LT100.

Anyone who has finished a marathon remembers the long training runs a couple of weeks before race day. Essential training is necessary if you want to strap on that elusive belt buckle or feel the satisfying, heavy weight of a medal as it hangs around your neck at the finish line. The harder the race, the sweeter the prize. Every step or turn of the pedal during the last three miles feels like torture, but the pain subsides when the vision of the finish line appears in the distance. Faith gets you off the starting block,

but perseverance, faithfulness, and long obedience will urge you past the finish line. In a generation where everyone gets a participation trophy, kids expect an instant reward without hard work. We have been conditioned by a quick-fix, fast-food, overnight, one-click culture. Entitlement and laziness are the hallmarks here, and they create a perfect contrast to a good work ethic and personal responsibility.

There may not be a more hard-working endurance runner than Noah. God rewards those who diligently seek Him, but He is also a judge to those who reject His commands in disobedience and sin. Noah lived in a wicked world, one we could hardly imagine. In those days, every single thought of mankind was continuously evil.¹ God saw something unique in Noah, so He gave him a vision.

“By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7, NKJV).

OWN THE VISION

Noah received a daunting vision: one of the judgment to come. God showed him a massive 510-foot ark equal in length to one-and-a-half football fields. He told Noah to build it to exact specifications because He was sending a massive flood to destroy all people.² Though the vision was terrifying, a merciful God was saving a righteous generation through the preparation of a massive boat with primitive tools and supplies. Noah and

his family would not perish. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”³ This God-sized vision was far beyond Noah, and he knew it. He would need incredible faith to pick up that hammer. If he didn’t, more lives would be lost, including those of his family.

What if every life is designed with a compelling vision to meet a desperate need? A God-sized vision and purpose are waiting to be fulfilled by you. Your purpose in life is at the intersection where your greatest passion meets a desperate need. How do you know it is your calling? You can’t stop thinking about the idea whether you are in the shower or in bed. Trusted friends and Scripture confirm it. The Holy Spirit guides you with inner peace like a compass. All signs will point to it being right. E. Stanley Jones says, “It’s unnatural for a Christian not to have an appetite for the impossible.” Awaken to the great vision and commission Jesus gave you in Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.” And know this: There is another flood of judgment coming, but this time it will be a “great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.”⁴ The signs of Christ’s return are happening all around us. There will be more earthquakes, more hurricanes, and more war. Sense the urgency of the Lord. The stakes have never been higher. You are called to be God’s own method of saving a generation. To ignore this vision from Jesus is to amble aimlessly while people perish.

Don’t listen to the voice saying you don’t matter or think, “what could I possibly add?” The answer is you can add Jesus! You are His hands and feet to those who are perishing, a light in a darkening world. God has a vision for your life. Take hold of

the Jeremiah 29:11 promise and never let go: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Ignore the haters and doubters, even the one inside your own mind. God has given you a burden and wired you in a special way with a unique calling. There are ways of fulfilling the Great Commission no one has tried before. Every leader who finishes strong ran their race aware of the vision of a great destiny. Decisions are based solely on vision. God has an eternal purpose for you to fulfill. His Kingdom is advancing and, incredibly, you’re invited to play a role.

FEAR OF THE LORD

Often when we hear the phrase “fear God,” we think of being scared, and rightly so. The Word says to not fear man but to “fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in Hell.”⁵ The fear of the Lord isn’t so much being afraid of God as it is being terrified to live life separated from Him. But as children of God, we know our eternal resting place is with God.⁶ This kind of fear should make you feel safe, as a child feels safe in his or her father’s arms. God will protect you, and He is your Rock when the floodwaters rise.

Genesis records Noah as a righteous man.⁷ Noah had to be fully convinced God would do what He said. He was moved to work out God’s vision by a deep, sincere fear of the Lord, and that “fear” was a powerful drive. In his heart of hearts, Noah knew the rain and flood were coming as a righteous, holy judgment upon an evil generation. And he knew if he didn’t trust

God, he and his family would die like the rest of mankind: alienated and separated from God.

Building a large structure like the ark could not have gone unnoticed or without ridicule. Many people must have heard of the coming wrath, but only Noah heard *and* obeyed. Just as Noah lived out what he heard from God, we should hear and put into practice the vision God is calling us to follow because faith without works is dead.⁸

This reverential awe vital to living out a godly life seems missing in this generation, even more so than in the ones that came before it. Perhaps that is why over half of those in this generation who were raised in church drop out by adulthood. The waters rose, the storms came, and they found their houses fallen because they were built on the sand. They did not hear and obey.

My good friend Kyle Volkmer explains it like this: “Nothing is more desperately needed in this time and hour than to have a supernatural revelation of the fear of the Lord. The Church in the United States is generally blind, naked, miserable, and poor. This is undoubtedly due to the irreverence toward the holiness of God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, the precursor and foundation of our faith, a fountain of riches and life, and it is the everlasting Gospel.”⁹ Kyle can drop the mic. He’s right and so is Solomon, the wisest man of another generation who proclaims, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him. Fear is the root leading to obedience. What God does in you, He does through you.

WORK HARD

Vision is the fun part. Everyone loves to dream. The challenge is the execution of the vision. It would be a long time before Noah ever felt the stormy wind begin to blow or saw the rain clouds gathering, but he believed and acted anyway. That is what faith does. Although the exact time it took Noah to build the ark is not specifically mentioned, historians believe it would have taken, at most, nearly sixty-five years to build.

I can't even imagine that. I get frustrated after forty-five minutes of building a Lego Resistance X-Wing Fighter with my son. Noah swung that hammer long before he took his cruise. Faith put a hammer in Noah's hand, and faithfulness drove the last nail into the boat years later.

There was another who picked up a hammer. His name was Jesus. As a carpenter, He faithfully swung that hammer for fifteen years before His Father sent Him out into public ministry. Imagine the development that needed to take place in the Son of God. He was sent to save the world. What a responsibility! So why "waste" so many years as a carpenter? It had to do with Jesus' heart. He wasn't concerned with "important," immediate ministry. He wasn't afraid of "missing" His calling. He wasn't worried about rushing God's timing. His only concern was to be about His Father's business.¹⁰ And here we see the heart of Jesus. Humble. Submissive. Patient. Faithful. Hardworking Servant.

Jesus said He came to serve and not to be served.¹¹ He took the humble nature of a servant who started as a carpenter and ended as a towel boy when he took a knee to wash the feet of His disciples. Nothing was beneath Him.

Being a simple carpenter in a small Jewish village may have seemed like a “little” vision, but you grow by finishing the little things and finishing them well. Faithfulness in small tasks prepares you for greater works. Jesus said in Luke 16:10, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much.” A life of faith is a life lived in long, faithful obedience to God. Persevering obedience is hard work. Noah and Jesus teach you a valuable lesson when you look close and lean in. They reveal the clear distinction between vision and the hard work it takes to fulfill it.

While attending college, I interned under a great pastor named Scott Wilson. I told him that God called me to the ministry and that I would commit to serving and learning from him as my mentor. Scott agreed, but the ministry didn’t end up looking the way I expected.

For two years, I never stepped foot on stage during service. Instead, I set up the stage and stacked chairs in a gym. I never once spoke into a mic, I never once publicly led a prayer. But I trusted God’s development in me and that He would fulfill the vision He’d called me to. The strong work ethic Scott instilled in me by asking me to do “behind the scenes” ministry was just the right “hammer” to prepare me for the God-sized vision waiting to be realized in my life.

I graduated college with a ministry degree and a readiness to pursue the vision God birthed in me two years earlier. My first assignment was also not what I was expecting. I was hired to

serve as a youth pastor in a small church in McKinney, Texas. I made \$150 per week with my wife and me also doing the janitorial work. My hammer was a toilet brush. After serving there, we moved to Colorado and continued our bi-vocational ministry of youth pastor and janitor. We did it because it was the only way we could pay rent. But God had a higher purpose. He was developing character. If God could trust us with swinging whatever “hammer” He gave us, He could trust us with His greatest treasure: people.

When we started Gateway, I became lead pastor. But God kept the “hammer” of humility in my hands. For seven years—364 Sundays—we arrived at 6:50 a.m. to set up and tear down in a school, then in a hotel, and finally in a movie theater. But every morning began the same way. Get there two hours before service began—which was before sunrise during most of the year—open trailers, pull equipment out of aging wooden cases, set equipment up, and troubleshoot twisted and broken cables, missing stools, or mic stands. Once service began, I preached, dripping in sweat from swinging that hammer. Whenever volunteers would encourage me to sleep in, to let them set up so I could come in late, I couldn’t say yes. Honestly, I didn’t trust my heart. God wanted me to keep serving to keep me humble.

Paul writes to a church family in Corinth, “I’m sure you’ve been to the stadium at least once to see athletes race. Everyone runs; only one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades, but you’re after one that’s eternal gold. I don’t know about you, but I’m running hard for that finish line. I’m giving it everything I’ve got. No sloppy living for me! I’m staying alert and in top condition.

I'm not going to tell everyone else all about the good news only to be caught napping and miss out on it myself."¹² I'm swinging that hammer and not putting it down until the vision is fulfilled.

But what if God gives you a hammer outside of your comfort zone? We weren't called out of darkness and into marvelous light to be comfortable.¹³ We're called into war, into daily battles.¹⁴ We're citizens of heaven living and working behind enemy lines.¹⁵ I'm sure Noah felt foolish sometimes building a boat when there was no water, but in time God proved Himself faithful. It may seem ridiculous at the time, but you should never resent the hammer placed in your hands. God placed it there. It is just as vital to ministry as the vision.

Never be afraid of hard work. This is where God develops your character and tests you to see if He can trust you with a higher Kingdom purpose. To achieve something important, whatever work is required is also important, no matter what it looks like.

Cleaning a toilet or setting up a stage might not seem important or noteworthy to you, but the "important" ministry couldn't function properly without it. Sure, it's not always pretty or fun. The season between the vision fulfilled and the grunt work behind the scenes and out of the limelight can be long. But never quit early. Swinging that hammer will enable you to "fly" one day.

You may be tempted to scream, "I don't want to do this! It's not my spiritual strength. God, You gave me the vision, why aren't You fulfilling it?" Your spiritual gift is called denying yourself and taking up your cross. Hard training is the process by which God develops your character. He cares more about your

foundation. This is when God does His greatest transformation in your life. Trust God's timing. Why do you do the things you do, and who do you do them for? Never forget your why behind all the hard work. Be faithful in the little. Love finds a need and meets it. There are no small roles in the Kingdom of God. What need isn't being met that you can meet right now?

God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called. You must run without the credit, without the paycheck, without the recognition from the stage, and even without the title. You will not have the endurance to cross the finish line without the hard training.

SAVE SOULS

The rainbow became God's promise to man that He would never destroy the Earth with a flood again, but to Noah it was also a reminder of God rewarding him with the salvation of his family. God will do the same for you. There is another judgment coming. This one will be far worse, and it is coming soon for this world is "being kept until the day of judgment" for the "destruction of the ungodly."¹⁶ You have a Kingdom purpose with an eternal prize. Imagine spending eternity with Jesus and those you helped reach. Will you obey the call to go and make disciples?

The great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "One act of obedience is better than a hundred sermons." Why is that? When you obey, you are literally living out the Word of God. You are on His mission, and His mission will never fail.

I once acted in obedience, and it became greater than 300 sermons.

Gateway Fellowship Church began in our living room with eight people on a Labor Day weekend. The vision God gave us was to become friends with 1,200 people in our community. We hung butcher paper on our wall, wrote the names of our new friends, and prayed in response to the burden. Our mission was to help them become devoted followers of Jesus. We stopped going through the drive-through and paying at the pump and instead sought face-to-face interactions. We introduced ourselves to our neighbors and hung out in coffee shops. We went *to* the sick and hurting, even in bars, following our personal convictions without making anyone feel judged. That's what Jesus did, and that's what we knew He wanted us to do.

The echo of God's heart to mine is remembering that every number has a name, every name has a story, and every story matters to God.

Let me close this chapter with one story, one name I will never forget. I met Val after school while we waited to pick up our daughters. We discovered we lived in the same neighborhood and shared a passion for mountain biking. I got his number and we rode together the next day. A few weeks later, Val stopped riding because of a brain tumor. He declined my offer to pray together because he stopped believing there was a God.

I listened to his story over pecan waffles in the kitchen nook of his home. It was cloudy and the tension was real. Moments passed before we started talking about the elephant in the room. Val stood up to pour another cup of coffee and then looked out the window. I could sense the heaviness on his heart.

After a moment of thick silence, he said, “My dad abused my mom for years. He cheated on her too.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“I was just a kid—five, I think,” he began and then paused with bitterness and pain just beneath the surface of his expression. “I prayed hard. I asked God over again to make my dad stop, to help my mom... but I guess He didn’t care because it never stopped.”

I told Val the same God he called out to when he was five was the same God who listened to him now. Another hard silence. I asked him if he was ready to surrender his life to Jesus. He said no thanks in a tone that sounded torn. It was obvious the Holy Spirit was drawing him close when he promised to call me if he changed his mind.

Two weeks later I went to visit Val in the hospital. While I was praying in the waiting room, my friend died of a brain seizure during his CT scan.

Devastated with grief, I left with an enormous hole in my heart and an unbearable weight of guilt for not doing more. I came home but couldn’t talk to anyone. I rode my bike for hours and cried often. I had moved into this new community, and Val had become my closest friend, and he was taken away from me too soon.

The next day, his widow Debra showed up at my front door. Her eyes were swollen and her heart was heavier than mine. In her hands, she held a stack of journals—Val’s journals. She said, “We don’t belong to a church and don’t know of another minister. Val would want you to officiate his funeral, but you have to read these first.”

After Debra left, I retreated to my office, holding the journals tight to my chest. My friend was gone, but perhaps there was more to know about my friend in these pages. I began with the most recent entries, and I quickly discovered an entry from a few days before that described his spiritual journey like a ship returning to a harbor. What I read astounded me! Val made a confession to God! My friend was saved! As I read those sweet words, I couldn't help but weep with relief. Because of the saving grace of Jesus, I could be sorrowful over the death of my friend but rejoice over his eternal destination.

Before we ever had a worship service, we had a funeral. To know Val was to know his friends, his family, and his faith. There in the chapel of the Sunset Funeral Home in San Antonio, Texas, I was surrounded by 350 of Val and Debra's friends and family. Stephanie and I had an incredible opportunity to share our story from the pulpit as people got up to honor Val. After hearing our story, Debra invited everyone to the grand opening of our church at Bob Beard Elementary School a few weeks later. Forty-one came, and eighteen of Val's friends and family surrendered their lives to Jesus at that first Sunday service on February 10, 2008. Many of them, including Debra and her daughter Isa, were baptized in water.

It was a bittersweet beginning for Gateway, but a beautiful example of how God brings death out of life. Just as He brought Noah and his family out of the flood, He brought Val out of death and into His arms. And He used Val's unique story to bring many others to salvation.

Souls matter to God. They must matter to you. Will you respond to God's unique plan for your life? Will you make a

commitment to never stop swinging that hammer, even when the work gets hard? You never know what God will build through you. Even if it's just one soul reconciled to God, know that all of heaven rejoices in that moment!