

# Runner's High

Lessons Learned from the Race

Charles Michael Snow

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*Runner's High*

by Charles Michael Snow

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All Scriptures referenced are from the Authorized King James Version.



This book is dedicated to my beautiful wife, Sierra. Despite knowing all that you are about to read, she was willing to give me a chance. She has brightened each of my days and has helped me to be the pastor I need to be. I love you.

## Trigger Warning!

The book you are about to read contains descriptions of mental health, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.

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# Foreword

*Runner's High* is not just a book of neatly applied connections between endurance running and the Christian Walk. It is interspersed with the real, unvarnished realities of life that many find very difficult or never discuss with anyone at all. Bro. Snow's candid and thoughtful approach makes this an easy choice to read for anyone who struggles in their daily Christian life or just needs to be reminded how great a God we serve.

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# Introduction

During my middle and high school years, I was a runner. Various things came and went in life, but running seemed to be a consistent part, a constant companion. Running was, and still is, a freeing experience. The way I can most closely liken the euphoric experience of endurance running is how I have heard motorcyclists describe riding a motorcycle. There is nothing but you and the pavement, with the wind blowing by you freely, no barriers or obstacles. This is commonly referred to in cross-country as the “runner’s high,” and it’s a fantastic feeling. I ran cross country and track, and while there are stark differences between the two sports, the sense of enduring freedom remained. My teammates and I endured countless hours of training and conditioning. We braved often unforgiving elements, whether it was running through knee-deep mud or shivering beside a track waiting for our heat (an individual race among a series of races) to start.

As I look back on those years of my life, I have begun to learn things about myself that I didn't see at the time. After all, the apostle Paul himself likens the Christian life to a race in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27,

*“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”*

The years that I dedicated myself to running were also the years that God was pricking my heart with conviction. They are the years that I experienced the most pain and hurt that I have felt as of yet, and they are the years containing the most monumental decisions that I will

probably ever be forced to make. There are some stories in this book that even the people closest to me may not know, events that have had a tremendous impact on my life, yet ones that I have kept very secret. This book will by no means be an exhaustive description of my upbringing or childhood. It may not even be completely chronological. Some chapters may be short and some long. My memory of these stories isn't as great as I would like. Still, my prayer is that as we explore the world of running and see how my life was changed during my time as a competitive runner, you will witness for yourself the unfathomable and immeasurable mercy of God on the life of a sinner like me.

# Chapter 1

## Discovering Running

So many aspects of life seem to happen by chance. Of course, as Christians, we believe that all things occur for a reason, and even the bad things in life will “work together for good” (Romans 8:28), but on this side of Heaven, it can often seem like a coincidence. My discovery of running was one of those things.

I attended Trinity Christian Academy in Jacksonville, Florida, for the entirety of my school experience, from kindergarten through my 4-year degree (excluding dual-enrollment courses at Florida State College at Jacksonville). At that time, 6<sup>th</sup> grade was still considered an elementary grade level. Since then, many schools, including Trinity, have begun to transition 6<sup>th</sup> grade into a middle school grade; however, that was not the case back then. At that time in my life, I was a

faithful band member. It was my second year playing trombone, and I was stoked. In my first year of band, I was awarded the Most Outstanding Band Member award by my teacher, Mr. Cordell, and I was proud of that award. I put the trophy up in my room and looked at it every day. I was looking forward to joining the marching band in my 7th-grade year and had been practicing in preparation. The summer between my 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade years, I auditioned for the marching band. It was a lot more difficult than I had expected. With a brass instrument, playing properly doesn't depend as much on your breathing as a woodwind instrument does. Instead, it is founded upon your ability to create compression with your lungs and diaphragm, something that was difficult to do when crabwalking across a football field. My heart was beating (or seemed to be) a million times a second when Mr. Cordell came out to announce who had made it, and when I heard "Charles Snow, trombone," I was jubilant. My dream had

come true, the thing I had been working on for months. I was so excited to get home and tell my parents. I remember getting home and telling my mom the good news. "I got in, Mom! All I have to do now is go to the marching band summer camp, and I can be in the marching band in 7<sup>th</sup> grade!" My mom, however, was not as pleased with this idea as I was. You see, while I was allowed to join the marching band in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, it wasn't common until 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup>, and there were band members all the way up into 12<sup>th</sup> grade. My mom was very concerned about her 12-year-old boy attending a summer camp full of 16- and 17-year-olds, with supervision that was likely to be lacking. To my great disappointment, my mom said I couldn't go to the camp. She gave me a light to hold onto, though. She said that I could attend the camp next summer, which would allow me to join the marching band in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

So, I went on to 7th grade. I went from one teacher to seven, a desk to a

locker full of books, and not nearly enough time between classes to use the bathroom. But there was something else filling the air in middle school that we didn't have on the "kiddie" side of campus: sports. The football team was usually the recipient of all the praise, although the softball team did eventually rise as well. If I recall, our varsity football team won the state championship four consecutive times while I was there, and the rumor was that the football coach was the highest-paid person in all of Trinity's ministries. Oh, and Heisman trophy winner Tim Tebow played on our football team while homeschooling. But no biggie.

Three of my brothers, Jared, Daniel, and Sam, played football, but I wasn't very interested. Running directly into the oppressive arms of a linebacker didn't really strike my fancy, nor did the nasty locker-room culture (yes, even in a Christian school). Eventually, though, I heard about this thing called "cross country," which, if I'm being frank with



you, I thought entailed traveling across the United States of America. I may have taken “cross country” too literally. I heard about the sport from my new youth pastor, Paul Woods. He was also the cross-country coach, and he had run during his school years. One could get a little jealous when they learn that his school years consisted of being stationed in Germany, so his afternoon jogs went through the heart of the Black Forest. He was actively trying to recruit new runners for this little-known and rarely mentioned sport and invited Sam and me to a scavenger hunt around campus. We thought it might be an entertaining time, so we went, which is when I found out my friend Jensen had actually run cross-country while we were still in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I suppose I had forgotten to read the part in the school handbook that allowed 6th graders to participate in sports, but oh well. Regarding the scavenger hunt, however, let me tell you that I had never run more in my life, and it showed. I was huffing and puffing, and there was no hope under

heaven that I was keeping up with the established runners. I was technically miserable, but I thought I'd give the sport a shot. The first race was a preseason race, hosted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Place Sports Running Club in Jax (a place I miss dearly), and we were allowed to run. My first race, and I had not trained a single day for it. I'm not sure whose idea that was. The foolishness of that decision soon became apparent, as I could barely run down the whole sidewalk, let alone 3.1 miles, and a race that should've taken 30 minutes for a slow runner turned into about an hour and a half ordeal. This was by far my worst race time ever, so I'm sure you understand why I don't keep that one in the record books. I learned something that day, though: you can't expect to be perfect at something new.

I had been running for all of about a day and a half, so I couldn't expect myself to run as if I had been running for a month or a year. The Christian life is a lot like that. When a lost person is saved, there is

an immediate change. Whereas he was sitting on the sidelines before, he can now be found running the race. But he has no idea what he is doing. He doesn't know any racing strategies. He doesn't know how to regulate his breathing or to sit down in his stride. He's trying, and that is what matters. When you see someone genuinely trying, don't knock them down for not winning gold. Encourage them to keep running and give them tips that you have learned from your race along the way.

Just like there was a day that I learned about cross country, there was also a day that I learned about Jesus. I was raised in a Christian home, and at the time, I did not have nearly the appreciation for that fact that I do now, especially now that my dad has gone home to be with our Lord. That appreciation is only confirmed when I am reminded that my parents actually chose me as an individual to be their son.

# Chapter 2

## Origin Story

I was born, not in Jacksonville, but near Zephyrhills in Pasco County, Florida. My biological parents were caught up in a fundamental sect of Mormonism that taught polygamy and an iron grip of control by the husband. My biological father was very abusive, both physically and mentally, to my mother and siblings. Eventually, the Florida Department of Children and Families stepped in and removed my siblings from the home. I say my siblings, as I was still in utero, my mother being pregnant with me, and I thus escaped the horror of that place. The brief description I have shared is based on stories told to me, and I can't comprehend what my family went through during that time. My biological father was tried and convicted of several felonies and was sentenced to prison for over a hundred years. He will never be free again, and while I have written to

him in prison, to forgive him and clear my conscience, he is unrepentant, and I have no desire to foster a relationship with him.

After I was born, I was placed in the foster system. My knowledge of this time is very spotty, but I am told that I was placed with a wonderful woman named Mrs. Delores Johnson. Both my mom and biological mother have spoken very highly of her. My mom has told me that Mrs. Delores taught me my shapes, colors, and numbers, all by the time I was about two and a half. I have a few photographs of me with her, and I wish I could have met her as an adult and allowed her to meet my daughter, Heidi. I tried to find her in 2024 but learned that she had passed away several years ago, which saddened me.

Fast forward to 2003, my mom and dad received a call that they were not going to adopt one child, but five. My parents were unable to have children of their own for various reasons. Still, my mom continued to desire and pray for children, and my dad, who had sworn he

would never have kids, eventually relented miraculously. My parents went from having no children in their home to having four, with me joining them soon after. The Lord had providentially allowed the five youngest of us to be adopted together, preventing our family from falling apart completely. Because of this, I learned from the earliest age that there was a God who loved me, and every day that I woke up in my house with my parents and family, this was proven anew with hearty evidence.

My parents were (and still are) professing Christians, and we attended Challenge Ministries in Orange Park, Florida, before moving to the Westside of Jacksonville and going to Trinity. I learned from a young age about the concepts of sin, the cross, Jesus, Heaven, and Hell. I became familiar with the stories of David and Goliath, Noah's ark, and Jonah and the whale. I memorized John 3:16 and Romans 3:23, but I was still lost.

You see, before I encountered cross country, I knew what running was, but I had never been introduced to the specific sport that was cross country. Similarly, as I was growing up, I was learning about Jesus and His Bible, but had never encountered Jesus personally. There were several times, three that I can remember, that I asked someone how to be saved. I recall asking my mother one time when I was about 4, while sitting in the bathtub. I remember another time when I was about eight or so, when I asked my mom before bed. The third time was when I was 12 in seventh grade, and my Bible teacher, Mr. Hannah, led me through the prayer of salvation on October 31, 2012 (Halloween). I held onto that profession for many years, but even though the world around me thought I was saved because of how I acted and what I told them, I was as lost as a black dog in a coal mine.

# Chapter 3

## The First Race, kinda

Somehow, the first, first race didn't scare me off despite my dreadful performance, and I decided to join the cross-country team that season. My mom took me to the 1<sup>st</sup> Place Sports Running store, where they recorded me running with a camcorder to measure my gait and set me on a pressure machine to determine my arch type. After they completed their foot science/wizardry, I walked out with a beautiful pair of Nike running shoes, featuring lightweight black fabric with a neon yellow-green sole and deep red laces and insignia. I do love those shoes. But the shoes didn't make me a runner. I had to do that. I began by attending the daily practices after school. For those of you who don't know, 3:30 pm in the summer in Jacksonville, Florida, doesn't exactly feel like a soothing breeze. It's hot, bright, muggy, and ready to punch a new runner right in the face.



Our training early on was pretty simple. Run. We were given a set amount of time, usually around thirty minutes, and our job was to run nonstop for those thirty minutes. In competitive running, stopping is the enemy, causing you to lose momentum, so we were explicitly instructed not to stop. We didn't always abide by those guidelines, but an attempt was made. This type of training is often described as "packing on the miles." It is foolish to begin working on speed if you don't first have the endurance to finish the race. It's essential in the Christian life to beware of putting the cart before the horse. Many Bible college students have made the mistake of diving into the deep, dark corners of philosophical theology and neglecting the fundamentals of Jesus, the Bible, and salvation. This mistake is fertile ground for heresies to grow.

As we continued training and working on building our endurance, we were told about the first race of the season: a Friday night race at Bishop

Kenny High School. Now, most cross-country meets are held on Saturday mornings, which often feature their own unique struggles. In Florida, or at least the part I grew up in, every morning was greeted with a dense layer of fog and thick dew. To this day, I carry a collapsible squeegee in my truck because in college I'd have to wipe the dew off my car's rear window each morning. This transforms a cross-country meet by producing cold, soaking wet feet before you even start the race, and an abundance of mosquitoes. Compared to that, a Friday night meet was the entry path to Beulah land. There was only one barrier to entry, however. We had to qualify for the race. Each race had two divisions, varsity and junior varsity. Varsity was made up of our top runners, usually 7 – 12, depending on the race, and our remaining runners ran in JV. My coaches, after describing our qualifying course, or "time trial," announced that the maximum time allowed to qualify was 30 minutes. A 30-minute 5k in competitive running is like

expecting a competitive hot dog eater only to eat five hot dogs. It's not even a struggle. But, for someone like me who had only ever run one 5k with the stellar PR (personal record) of an hour and a half, I was a little concerned about whether I would qualify. As it turned out, I had good reason to be concerned, because across the finish line I came, huffing and puffing... at a time of 30:32. 33 seconds too slow. Extra salt was added to the wound when I realized that my brother, Sam (who is built like a football player, not a long-distance runner), beat me and qualified.

You may think that I accepted my fate and committed myself to training harder and qualifying for the next race. You would be wrong. Instead, I was wheeling and dealing to try to convince my coaches to let me go. My petitions encompassed everything from "that time is wrong, I finished before then," to "I promise that if you let me go, I'll make the time." It's kind of sad and pathetic to think back on now, but to my wonder and

amazement, my coaches allowed me to race. They showed me mercy.

My coaches had no reason to let me race. There was no benefit in it for them. They had clearly defined expectations to qualify for this race, and I had very clearly not met them. The just thing, and the fair thing for all the other runners who had to abide by those expectations, would have been to bench me. But they didn't.

We are all sinners. I definitely am, as demonstrated by the blatant lies I told my coaches. The just thing would be for God to stick with the system. He has defined clear standards and expectations for us, and we have failed to meet them. The Bible says in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We have all fallen short of His standard of perfect holiness, and even though the just thing would have been for God to bench us and let us endure our fate in Hell, He chose instead to offer us mercy, to allow us to run the race anyway. 1 Peter 1:3 says, "Blessed be the God and Father

of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,”. I, just as all men do, definitely need the mercy of God. The only reason I am here today, the only reason you are holding this book in your hands, is because of God’s mercy. But more on that later.

(By the way, I did run that race and finished at 29:48, my new PR!)

# Chapter 4

## A Decision of Identity

As you may recall, I was once an avid trombonist. I still love to play the trombone, although I'm not as proficient at it as I once was. In seventh grade, however, I was faced with a difficult decision. The summer before, I had been ecstatic about the possibility of joining the marching band, but that hope seemed dashed when I wasn't allowed to attend band camp. As I began my third year of band, my focus began to shift. I had started running cross country, and even though it was difficult, I was really enjoying the challenge. This occurred at the same time as my difficulties in band class began to grow. The music we played had grown much more complicated, and I was struggling to learn how to play a fundamental aspect of music: the slur.

In most instruments, playing a slur is relatively simple. The idea is that

instead of stopping the stream of air, making the instrument play different notes, you continue the air, allowing a transition to take place. With a trumpet, flute, or tuba, this act is as simple as pressing the new arrangement of valves while continuing to play. It is not this way with the trombone. The trombone is a unique instrument in a concert band, as it uses a slide, rather than fixed valves, to play notes. For example, if I'm supposed to play a slur from F in 1<sup>st</sup> position to G in 4<sup>th</sup>, I have to push the slide through 3 other notes to get there, which is not a slur. To make up for this natural barrier, trombonists have to use their tongue to lightly break the note during the transition, allowing a proper slur. While this is something I have learned since, I could not figure it out then. Most of the time, I would ignore the slur and play the notes individually, which would consistently lower my grade. This all came to a head during finals week of 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I almost failed my final exam. The band final consisted of two parts: theory and

performance. I aced the theory portion, but bombed the performance, all because of that slur. I was struggling so much that when the yellow paper arrived, allowing me to choose my electives in 8th grade, I decided not to return for band. My struggle with the slur was a significant factor in that decision, but not the primary one.

Whereas 3<sup>rd</sup> year band members have the option to join the marching band, those in their 4<sup>th</sup> year, or symphonic band members, were all but required to join. The marching band took place at the same time of year as football, the fall, which ran concurrently with the cross-country season. I remember Mr. Cordell begging me to stay. Perhaps he saw something in me that I didn't see at the time. He even offered to let me stay in symphonic but not join the marching band. But I had made up my mind, and the trombone went back to the music rental store. I didn't play the trombone again until I was 20 years old, 7 years later.



Sometimes in the Christian life, we are faced with a choice: two paths to take. Oftentimes, we cannot do both; we have to pick one. I couldn't play trombone in the marching band and run cross-country at the same time. I had to choose. Similarly, Jesus tells us in the Bible that we cannot serve two masters. He said in Matthew 6:24, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." We each must decide whether we will serve the one true God or our own lusts and pleasures. We cannot serve both.

# Chapter 5

## Alone Together

Cross country is both an individual sport and a team sport. It's individual in that your placement in a race is entirely dependent on your own efforts. You're not waiting for the quarterback to throw you the ball or watching to catch a rebound. You train as hard as you want and run as fast or as slow as you want in a race. Your time is entirely up to you. But it's also team-based because of how teams are ranked. In varsity races, each finishing placement garners that many points. The first-place finisher earns 1 point, the second-place finisher earns 2 points, and so on. As each of the runners crosses the finish line, their points are allocated to their respective teams, and the team with the fewest points wins. If your team produced the first-place finisher, but the rest were ranked in the 30s or 40s, then that team would lose to another team that all finished in the 20s. Cross country is

technically a team sport, but it doesn't typically feel like that. There are times when you're running through dense foliage, or when you're running a longer race, like a 15k (9.3 miles), when the runners spread out, and you don't see anyone else. It's just you, the road, and a hypothetical finish line somewhere in front of you. You must depend on yourself and be highly motivated.

I am reminded of my junior year of high school. I had run for several years at that point, and my best race PR was behind me. And I was so alone. I struggle to think back to this time because it was challenging, and much of it has been buried in the recesses of my memory. One thing I do remember, though, is that no one knew how much I was struggling. My parents were both working night shifts at this time, my dad as a truck driver and my mom as a nurse, so I saw them very rarely. I was the only one still living at home, and I felt very alone. I'd drive to school, go to practice, and come home. I knew about

God, and I think at this time I believed, or assumed, that I was saved. But I had no relationship with Him, and He felt so far away that I never really thought about Him. This loneliness had begun to show itself in my life in very dangerous ways, namely, self-harm.

I discovered self-harm when I was 15 through a friend at school. She was also suffering at this time, and she was able to feel in control of her life through self-harm. This was only exacerbated when I discovered an entire subculture on Tumblr of people who depended on self-harm to feel in control of their lives. It was never described as something ideal, but rather necessary to “cut” through the dark fogs of depression.

My self-harm experience started in the shower one day with a utility knife in my hand. I was depressed but not stupid, and I knew that the shower would be an easy way to hide the evidence from my parents, who simply “wouldn’t understand”. I didn’t want anyone to

know what I was struggling with, so I avoided the usual places, my arms and thighs, and decided to cut my torso instead. About 10 or so scars remain today as silent witnesses to the struggles of that night. Self-harm did, in fact, make me feel in control of my life. I was already in such internal pain that inflicting pain upon myself gave me control over my greatest struggle.

This all culminated on Christmas Eve in 2016. My parents were once again working, the unfortunate responsibility of those in the medical and emergency professions, and I was lonelier than I had ever been. Suddenly, I began to have these thoughts in my mind. I wouldn't describe it as hearing a voice per se, but I seemed to be witnessing thoughts in my mind that I didn't remember producing. They went something like this, "You know, if you were to die right now, you would go to Heaven, where you want to be anyway. Why don't you bypass all this pain and go to Heaven now?" At the time, these

thoughts seemed quite logical. I believed in Jesus, or so I thought. Looking back, I can recognize that while I assented to the facts of the Bible, I had not repented of my sins, nor trusted in Jesus alone to save me from the penalty of my sins.

So, I decided to look in the medicine cabinet. After all, “what’s the harm?”, I thought. I was just looking. I found a brand-new bottle of pain pills and some sleeping pills that I didn’t recognize. I took them with me into my bedroom and closed the door. I recall setting the bottles down on the white plastic cart I used as a side table and just looking at them. I didn’t pray or do much thinking, I just sat there looking at them, feeling absolutely empty inside. One second, I was looking at them, and the next, I was popping off the lids and taking every single pill in the bottles. I recall setting the bottles down, going to turn off the lights, and lying down in bed, expecting to soon wake up in Paradise.

I did wake up, but not in Paradise. I woke up very suddenly, an hour or so

later, feeling immense pain in my stomach and throwing up in my trash can. In the trash can, I saw all the pills I had swallowed, mostly intact. My head was spinning, and my stomach was lurching in pain. I recall looking up at the ceiling and just asking why, the first time I had even attempted to pray during this struggle. As I began to collect my thoughts once again, my eyes turned and locked onto my Bible sitting upon the shelf. I didn't read my Bible very much at that point, primarily just for schoolwork and the like, and I didn't feel much of a personal connection to it or the God it spoke of. But at that moment, I felt compelled to read it. I got up and slowly went to it, walking gingerly as my torso continued to writhe in pain. After retrieving my Bible, I opened it to a random place: 2 Kings 6. I remember thinking, "I'm not sure what a story of a king has for me," but I was wrong. In 2 Kings 6, Ben-hadad, king of Syria, is trying to conquer Israel by capturing and defeating the king. After several attempts and failures to capture the king, Ben-

hadad is convinced that there is a traitor amongst his ranks. His servants inform him that the problem is not a mole, but rather that there is a prophet in Israel who tells the king what Ben-hadad's plans are. Ben-hadad then decides to capture this prophet and sends his army to attack the city where the prophet Elisha was staying. The Bible says they woke up and saw that Ben-hadad's forces surrounded their city. Elisha's servant became overwhelmed with fear, but Elisha remained calm and collected. This demeanor baffled the servant, who asked Elisha how he could be so calm in the face of such an enemy. Elisha responded that those who were with the Jews were greater than the soldiers of Ben-hadad. Elisha then prays to God, asking Him to open the eyes of his servant. God does so, and the servant sees what Elisha sees: an army of angels surrounding the army of Ben-hadad.

This story floored me. I began to look around the room, wondering if I was truly



alone or if there were spiritual beings there with me. The simple truth I learned that day burned itself into my psyche, and I hold onto it to this day. *Even when I am lonely, I am not alone.* Even if I can't see anyone with me, God is there with me. I did not give my life to Christ that night, but it laid the foundation for that eventual decision. I was not alone.

Remember that even if you're running a race and you can't see anyone around, God is still there with you. Even in the darkest moments, God's light is ever present.

# Chapter 6

## A Hard Decision

Like I mentioned in the Introduction, for many years, running was a significant part of my life. Hours were dedicated to it each day, whether in season or not, and even things like my diet and water intake were heavily regulated. I loved it. I didn't realize how much I ran and how little I rested until it began to take its toll. As my sophomore and junior years came and went, I began to be a little more tired than usual. My endurance was still present, but I was having difficulty training for speed, which caused me to plateau at around a 20-minute 5k. My PR for my running career is (and probably forever shall be) a 19:48 5k that I ran at Florida State University, home of the Seminoles (sorry Gators). That was a varsity-only meet, and I had trained hard to qualify.

As I continued running, I began to experience pain in my right knee, specifically. I ignored it for a while; after all, aches and pains aren't foreign to runners, but it continued to worsen. This problem fully revealed itself during a track meet at Ed White High School. I was running the 1,600-meter race, which consists of 4 laps, and about halfway through, I felt a pop in my right knee. It felt like there was a fireball inside my knee, and I almost fell face-first onto the track. Somehow, I managed to hobble the remainder of the race, finishing a far cry from my 5:30 PR, and was helped back to the tent by my girlfriend and coach. We put some ice on it and hoped for the best. Unfortunately, the best did not come.

As I tried to start training again the following week, it became abundantly clear that this problem was not just going to vanish. I ended up visiting my doctor, and she told me about something called "bursitis." My understanding from what I was told is that in many of our joints,

especially our knees, there is a small fluid sac that helps with shock absorption and allows the joint to move smoothly. Bursitis occurs when the sac becomes damaged and starts to swell to heal. This inflammation negatively affects walking and running, and it feels very uncomfortable. The hardest part is that this problem will not get better if the injured person continues to run. I wasn't allowed to run anymore.

This news hit me like a pallet of bricks. My life had been changing rapidly since I entered the dual enrollment program. I was now spending the majority of my day at a community college across town, not at Trinity. Running was something that had remained consistent throughout that transitional period, and now it seemed like it was being taken away. My doctor tried to encourage me by informing me that I could run again someday, but she didn't have the desired effect. Endurance seems to have a half-life. It's very easy to get lazy and lose your

ability to run for miles at a time with no problem. It can be difficult to rebuild that endurance back up.

I had to make the difficult decision to quit running for the foreseeable future. I went and told my track coach, Coach Hersey, the news, and although he understood, he was just as disappointed as I was. Life had made it abundantly clear that I had to live differently, and I didn't have much of a choice but to acquiesce.

We all live lives of sin. We get comfortable in that structure. After all, we are living for ourselves most of the time, so what's not to enjoy? But after my brief flirtation with death, I realized that life would never be the same. As I mentioned earlier, I had affirmed the logical nature of many biblical truths. I believed God existed; the natural world was too complex for me to believe otherwise. I believed in Creation, as evolution and natural selection seemed far too silly for me to believe. I didn't have any issue

believing that a God who made everything could also do miraculous things, like send a global flood or talk out of a burning, yet not consuming, bush. I believed that Jesus was the Messiah and was born of a real virgin, not just a young woman. I believed that Jesus probably never did anything wrong and that He really did die on a cross. I even believed it to be logical that Jesus rose from the dead.

Now, after hearing all those things, you may be thinking, “Charles, I think you were saved,” and if I get to Heaven one day and learn I was actually saved when I was 12 rather than when I was 17, it won’t bother me a bit. But I know my heart. I affirmed all those things in my mind, but had never placed my trust and faith in Christ. My suicide attempt opened my eyes to the reality of the situation. No longer did I feel content merely agreeing with these concepts in my mind. I needed to determine whether I would believe on these things and allow them to change my

life. One way or the other, I was going to decide who I would serve.

For several months, I pursued apologetic resources about Christianity, and I mainly remained unchanged. Apologetics merely reaffirmed in my mind that Christianity was logical, not that it was something to allow my life to be affected by. But on October 2, 2017, I made a realization. I was at college, sitting outside the dining hall reading comics as I waited for my next class to start, and I began to look around. People were cursing and laughing together in the corner. There was a group of LGBTQ+ activists standing behind a table, handing out condoms and literature. As I examined these groups and others, I began to feel a sense of disgust at their actions. This surprised me to a small degree, as I had typically ignored those kinds of people, but as I processed the feeling I was having, I realized a fundamental truth, one that changed everything for me. This was how God felt

about me. God was looking at my life, and upon witnessing all the sin and wickedness in my life, He could do nothing but express disgust at my sin.

My heart dropped, and I began to feel tears well up in my eyes. I hurriedly packed up my things and walked to a private restroom underneath the second-story walkway. I stepped in and managed to lock the door before falling on the nasty bathroom floor. I wasn't thinking, though, about what germs or DNA specimens were on the floor; I was thinking about how filthy and vile I was. My knowledge about the "reasonableness" of faith was inconsequential in that moment. I wasn't thinking about the Kalam cosmological argument, the epistemological nature of the Bible, or the ontology of God. I knew all those things, but they didn't lead me to repentance and salvation. I was thinking about how terribly I had lived my life, and how merciful God had been in letting me keep it. To this day, I don't fully understand why God chose to let me live



that dark night, but I now know He had His purposes. On that afternoon in that nasty bathroom, I finally repented of my sins and asked Jesus to come into my heart and save me. My life has never been the same since.

# Chapter 7

## Change of Diet

When you start running, you soon realize that no matter how great you may be in other areas of life, the moment you lace up your sneakers, you're beginning at the back of the pack. Running takes a lot of work to master. There must be a proper balance of rest, nutrition, hydration, and training that pushes you just a little more than you're used to, but not too much as to get injured. When you start, though, you know none of that. Many runners think that they can be great all by themselves. They cannot. The best runners have coaches, trainers, nutritionists, and therapists to ensure they are operating at their peak ability.

When I began running, I joined the slow group of newbies who were hoping to be fast one day. We had to listen to our coaches and the veteran runners to know what to do and what not to do. If we got

haughty and decided not to listen, then any injury was our fault. We couldn't do the same things we did as couch potatoes and hope to be great runners. When I was running, we were given specific guidelines that we were expected to follow. Friday night, before a Saturday morning meet, was supposed to be a carb-loading night. Go home and eat pasta. That rule wasn't too difficult. The other rules, though, weren't as fun. We were not allowed to drink soda, energy drinks, tea, or coffee during the season. The idea was that caffeine dehydrates you, making it much more challenging to stay hydrated, a prerequisite for running during a Florida summer. If anyone was caught drinking one of these beverages, they were subject to an intense workout to burn the dumb idea out of their heads (I guess it worked because I only did it once). Planks, burpees, Russian twists, and all other manner of hellish exercises awaited the poor soul who tasted a Mountain Dew. We were also instructed to drink water all day long, so much water in fact that we were

told if our pee was yellow, we weren't drinking enough. We couldn't eat the same way we did before we started running.

Many Christians make the mistake of thinking that when they accept Christ and begin this new journey, they can do it alone, fueled by the same things they did when they were lost. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that we cannot do this thing alone. Ecclesiastes 4:9-15 says, "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." This is why Jesus created His church so that Christians could come together in fellowship and edification. It's very easy for Christians trying to go it alone to fall into a pit of doubt and

despair. God created us to exist in fellowship for a reason. We also can't expect to do the same things we did as lost people and be successful as Christians. Lost people read dirty magazines and listen to wicked music. Christians guard their eyes and ears. Lost people go to bars, strip clubs, and public beaches full of half-naked people. Christians flee from these temptations to sin.

# Chapter 8

## Watch Out for Obstacles

When running on trails (and occasionally on paved roads), you must watch out for obstacles. Wooded trails are rarely perfectly flat and can often be dangerous. Before a race, the course workers will typically walk the trail and mark roots, rocks, and stumps with neon spray paint so that runners can notice and avoid them. This, however, can sometimes lure an unsuspecting runner into a false sense of safety. Even the most aware marker will sometimes miss obstacles, and if you blindly follow the marks, you will sometimes stumble and fall. At other times, such as during training, there is no one to mark the hazardous areas. You must trust in your own senses to protect you. This can be tough when you are tired and focused. When you are racing, it is not uncommon for runners to develop a sort of tunnel vision where they're focused on the finish line and not much else. When this

happens, a runner can trip over even a marked obstacle. Other times, you could be running in a pack, with the person in front of you blocking your line of sight. Any number of things can happen.

I recall a race I ran at the Alligator Farm. My mom had required my brother and me to drink a whole bottle of water before leaving the house. So, by the time we made it to the race, I had to pee more than I had ever had to before (or since). By the time I finished, my race was called. I didn't have time to walk the trail, warm up, or stretch, so I was starting with a disadvantage. About halfway through the race, I was struggling but still making good time. If I remember correctly, I was trying to break into a 20-minute PR, and I was on pace to do that. At that halfway point, though, a fellow Trinity runner who had been neck and neck with me started to push me into the brush on the side of the trail. I don't know if this was purposeful (I'd like to think it wasn't), but it caused me to run in an area that wasn't

well marked. I wasn't aware enough about the fact that the markings were missing, because I soon tripped over a root and fell. I wasn't hurt, but killing your momentum like that in a race can cost critical seconds, not just in the time it takes to get back up, but also in the time it takes to hit your stride once again. Because of that incident, I had to wait another week before I broke 21 minutes.

As a Christian, there have been a variety of obstacles that have ended up in my path. I think Satan sometimes likes to throw spaghetti at the wall and see what sticks. Early in my journey of faith, I had to face mental health challenges, pornography, loneliness, uncertainty, backbiting friends, and heretical doctrines. Each of them was something I had to be vigilant towards as I ran my race, and I must remain vigilant for whatever Satan (or my own flesh) throws against me in the future. In Ephesians 6:16, we are urged to add the shield of faith to our armor, that we might "be able



to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.” Faith is the tool God uses to fashion a shield of protection for us against the Devil.

There are plenty of obstacles in the Christian life. This probably isn’t news to you. Sometimes people will mark these obstacles for you. Parents, pastors, mentors, and older Christians can all help you see barriers to your Christian life. The author of Hebrews tells us about sins and weights that easily beset us. Something doesn’t have to be a sin to hinder our Christian life. But these faithful Christians aren’t able to mark everything for you. Pray diligently each day that God will open your eyes to these hindrances, and that He will help you to avoid them. Then, one day, consider helping mark the obstacles in a younger Christian’s path through discipleship and mentorship.

# Chapter 9

## Bogged Down

For most people, looking out of the window and seeing a torrential downpour would be cause to stay indoors. If this happens during the summertime, I doubt you'd find the serious runner staying in. A heavy summer rain is my absolutely favorite time to run. Think about it. When you run, your body becomes hot and begins to sweat, which can cause dehydration and make you feel unwell. Running in the rain changes all that. You're no longer sweating like a fat pig in the Sahara, as the rain cools you off nicely. It's great!

What is not great, however, is running in the results of a big rainstorm. I once ran a race at the St. John's Charter School following a terrible rain. I was already dreading this race because this school had installed the most awful piece of sporting equipment I have ever seen: an

asphalt track. I have never heard a valid argument for why an asphalt track even exists. It is miserable to run on and deprives runners from using a valuable (and expensive) tool: racing spikes. We began this race like any other, but it soon became clear that it was anything but normal. The race consisted of two laps around the property, with at least half the course now consisting of knee-deep mud. For those who haven't experienced the privilege of running through deep mud, the closest comparison I can think of is trying to run through water, like in a pool or the ocean. There is a tremendous amount of resistance pushing against you as you try to make your stride, preventing you from setting a rhythm and straining smaller, lesser-used muscles. It was insanely difficult to do that for over 3 miles. No one achieved a PR that day; we were just happy to finish so we could rinse off with the water hose.

Sometimes life, especially the Christian life, will bog you down. Maybe

you struggle with a particular sin, and even though you know God can forgive you, you choose to continue dwelling in guilt. Perhaps a tragedy occurred in your life, and even though in your mind you know God is good, you're struggling to see that goodness in the reality of your day-to-day life. There are many reasons why you may become bogged down, and know that if you haven't felt this way yet, you will soon. There have been countless times that I have found myself in the pit. You've heard about some of them already. I recall my first semester of college after graduating high school as particularly difficult. My dad's sudden passing was difficult as well. In my ministry as a staff member and pastor, there have been many struggles that I've had to trudge through. But I did just that: I trudged.

The apostle Paul struggled with a thorn in the flesh. Peter struggled with hypocrisy and denial. David struggled with lust. Noah struggled with drunkenness. Jonah struggled with

bigotry. Elijah struggled with depression. The list of real people in the Bible who struggled with real, relatable situations is long. The key? They didn't remain in the mud pit.

Paul learned that Christ was his strength. Peter allowed Christ to wipe away his guilt. David repented fervently. Noah was known as just. Jonah took God's second chance. Elijah stood up and carried on. How will your story be told? Will you be known as the one who got bogged down in the mud, or as the one who kept running and crossed the finish line?

# Chapter 10

## Hitting Your Stride

Hitting your stride during a run is a fascinating phenomenon. It's a long-distance concept; hence why shorter runs are known as sprints or dashes. There comes a point in a race, typically around  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile for me, where the effort of running begins to go away. Sure, your heart is still beating faster and you're still breathing harder, but you don't feel like you're constantly exhausting energy. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it feels great! This function allows a runner to run for miles on end. It's like cruise control or autopilot. You set the gear and chug along. To race effectively, you must be able to develop and strengthen this function. Endurance training unlocks it; speed training enhances it. With speed training, your stride may begin at an 8-minute-per-mile pace, but it will eventually improve, say to 7 minutes. It's an essential skill to foster.

But it can also be a detriment for the inexperienced runner. Like I said, it feels great to run in your stride. Running in stride is when you feel your freest and best. The problem is that even though it feels like you're running at a consistent speed, you're probably not. It takes specific, intense training to master your stride. To maintain the same pace, you have to push against your stride, ever so slightly exerting yourself outside of your comfort zone. This is not enjoyable by any means, as instead of sitting in your stride and coasting, you are instead pushing yourself for the entire race. The process of learning this was grueling. During training, we would regularly run "repeats." These drills consisted of running a certain distance at "race pace." These distances would typically be half a mile to a mile, with the occasional two-mile repeat thrown in for good measure. After running the first leg, we then had a short period in which to rest before we had to run again. As the afternoon wore on, it became increasingly difficult to maintain

that “race pace” and keep consistent splits. However, it was this training that helped develop our strides during races.

There have been several seasons in my Christian life where I was faced with an important decision: coast or push ahead? It can be easy to fall into the rut of just doing the bare minimum that shows people you still love Jesus and keeps them off your back. Jesus, in Revelation 3:15-16, said this about the church in Laodicea, “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” It’s almost better to be as cold as a corpse than to be halfway warm. A wise man once said that if you’re not growing in the Christian life, you are regressing. If you choose to become complacent, thinking that you are keeping the same pace, you will soon find that you have actually been slowing down and regressing in your Christian life. Only by constantly pushing ahead, reaching for



Christ, and desiring to grow will you live  
a worthwhile life for Christ.

# Chapter 11

## Fakery

One of the beautiful things about running is all the interesting things you find and see. One time while running in the back of my school's property, I found a large hole in the hog wire fence dividing the property from the outside world. As any young runner in my position would do, I went through the hole to investigate. What I found continues to intrigue me to this day. I discovered a shack of some sort, perhaps an old covered stable. The shack was abandoned and had been for years, it seemed. Fallen tree limbs had caved in half of the roof, but there was still a treasure trove of "artifacts" to discover. There were all kinds of random tools, buckets, and junk strewn about inside the shack and in the surrounding grass. The most notable feature of this shack, though, was the pentagram drawn on the inside wall, surrounded by a variety of symbols that I didn't recognize. I was still

lost at this time, and didn't think much of it, but I do continue to wonder what transpired in that shack in years past. I explored the surrounding area and found it mostly abandoned. The closest house I saw was about a quarter of a mile west through the woods and tall grass. I was highly intrigued by this discovery.

I recall showing this place to only two other people: my brother, Sam, and my girlfriend at the time. She was not interested in it, while Sam and I made plans on how to sneak my dad's tools to school to fix up the shack. Fortunately, those plans never came to fruition, but perhaps the most detrimental aspect of the "Satan Shack," as it became known, was that it allowed me to live a lie. During the cross-country season, the days of the week were predictable. Mondays were long run days, usually at the Cecil Field Commonwealth or downtown along Jacksonville's famous bridges. Tuesdays were typically speed workout days of different kinds. Wednesdays were long

run days, but shorter, as practice was abbreviated due to the Wednesday night youth group. Thursdays were usually when we ran our time trials, and Fridays consisted of easy runs designed to clear the lactic acid from our muscles before our Saturday race day. What that meant is that Wednesday and Fridays were days when I could run off on my own and have 30 minutes to an hour by myself. I wasn't technically supposed to run alone, but by that point, I was one of the more senior members of the team and didn't have to answer for it. Instead of doing the honest thing and running my assigned time as I should've, I would oftentimes run to my Satan Shack and hang out exploring until the time to return. I'd always make sure to give myself at least 10 minutes of running so that I was sweating when I returned to base camp.

Many Christians at some point in their lives find themselves living a lie. Most of my childhood before I was saved was spent living a life that fooled people

into believing I was a Christian. Even as someone in full-time ministry, the temptation to let up and put on a mask for a season can be intense. But it is not worth it. I am convinced that these escapades into the woods, forsaking my training, are why I never improved beyond my 9th-grade year. I stopped putting in the work and instead tried to put on the mask of a dedicated runner.

Jesus viewed this sin as so serious that He publicly condemned the Pharisees for their hypocrisy in Matthew 23:25-28. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye

also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” Jesus chastised the Pharisees for putting on a face of righteousness while maintaining a heart of iniquity. Don’t we struggle with the same sin?

If you stop working on your Christian life, if you stop pursuing Christ and desiring to be conformed to His image, you will never grow. You can put on a mask, just like I did. You may even fool those around you who lack discernment into thinking that you are a great Christian, but God will know. Those around you with discernment will understand. Looking back, I know there was no way that I was fooling my coaches. If I wanted to improve, I would have, but it didn’t mean enough to me to put in the work. That wasn’t something they could instill in me; I had to make my own choice. Don’t fall into the trap of fakery. Be authentic and authentically pursue Jesus. It’s worth the effort.

# Chapter 12

## Over the Fenceline

One of my favorite races that I have ever run was the Gate River Run. This 15k race takes you all through Jacksonville's riverfront, through the Landing, past Friendship Fountain, and over the Main Street and Hart bridges. It was a fast-paced, exhilarating race, and it certainly didn't feel as long as it was. I was initially supposed to stay with my brother, Sam. My mom had told us to stick together, as she was worried about her boys joining a crowd of thousands of people for over an hour. That was my plan, but after waiting for several minutes as Sam used a porta-potty, I decided I was tired of losing time to my brother's bathroom break.

As I ran this race, it was interesting to see the reactions of people on the sidelines. Many were cheering on specific runners. Occasionally, I'd see someone

holding a posterboard sign (my favorite said, “Run like you’re chasing the ice cream truck!”) or wearing a t-shirt with someone’s face emblazoned upon it. But there were also some bizarre individuals. At one point, the race took us through a smaller neighborhood, past a cul-de-sac. In the cul-de-sac, at the end of one of the driveways, was a table with a sign that said, “Free Mimosas.” Mimosas usually are some mixture of citrus juice mixed with champagne or sparkling wine—definitely an odd thing to be handing out during a race. Further on, we found ourselves bottlenecked into a narrow alleyway, with fenced-in backyards on either side. In one of the backyards, 3 or 4 people were handing small cups of beer, as well as strips of bacon and sausage, over the fence to the runners, straight into the hands of willing recipients. Apart from the fact that, as a Christian, accepting those alcoholic beverages would have greatly hindered my testimony, doing so, or eating that greasy meat, would have totally ruined my race.



When I am racing, my body becomes fine-tuned. I won't even drink water during a race because it will slosh around in my stomach and cause cramping. I can't even begin to imagine how I would have felt had I taken that beer and bacon. I probably would have started to hurt, and I definitely would have slowed down. My ability to run my race would have been greatly hindered.

The Christian life is similar in this regard as well. Hebrews 12:1 reminds us, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." Even the author of Hebrews recognizes that sin and weights in our lives will negatively affect our ability to run the race set before us. There are two categories of things that affect our lives according to Hebrews: sin and weights. Or, if I might relate to my race, beer and bacon. It may be easy for us to say no to

the sins in our lives. After all, sin is usually clear-cut, right or wrong. But sin is not the only thing that affects our race. There are things in life that aren't necessarily right or wrong, but they will weigh us down. It wasn't wrong for me to eat bacon that day. My Christian testimony wouldn't have been negatively affected. But it would have weighed me down as I tried to run my race.

Throughout my life, there have been things that weighed me down—depression, stress, anxiety, the expectation of others, etc. The question is not whether those things will appear in our lives; they will. The question is whether we will allow them to weigh us down. Will you grab hold of the bacon or allow yourself to pass it by, free from the weight that it would impose upon your race? Don't merely guard against the temptation to sin; guard also against the temptation to bring weights into your life.

# Chapter 13

## The “In Crowd”

Everyone who joins a cross-country team has the same goal at some point: to qualify to run in varsity. As I mentioned earlier, the varsity team in cross country generally consisted of the fastest 7-12 runners, depending on the race. Everyone else was pushed down into the junior varsity. It was not uncommon to have your 10 or so varsity runners run their race, followed by 20 JV runners. This had the added effect of making the varsity team rather exclusive and competitive. If you made it into varsity, it was because you pushed someone slower than you out.

Running in varsity did not just allow you to run the varsity race; it also came with exclusive perks. Behind our school's property, there was a wooded area followed immediately by a large lake. This lake was accessible by running through the church's cemetery, past the “do not

enter” sign, and alongside the retention pond visible from I-10. I don’t know what the lake is actually called, but we always referred to it as Lake Victory. It was most likely to go back there. Looking at the map now, I see that the lake butts up to a property in the Crystal Springs neighborhood, but all I knew then was that it was privately owned.

When you qualified for varsity, you unlocked a secret adventure: the ability to run to Lake Victory and go swimming. Why did one have to be in varsity, you may ask? Because you had to be able to outrun the angry old man on the golf cart who would occasionally come to run the punks (us) off his land. Definitely a bad thing. Definitely shouldn’t have participated, but I did. These runs typically happened on Wednesdays and were initiated with the code word “bubbles.” If specific individuals said that word, we knew we’d be going to the lake that day.

It was a beautiful lake. There was a dock you could walk down, and a trail that encircled the lake. There was also a nearby field full of lovely red flowers. But all of that was quickly forgotten when the old man came by again on his golf cart. The only difference was that this time he was holding a rifle. That changed my perspective on “bubbles” radically, and I distinctly remember running as fast as I could back to the school, telling myself I would never go back. And I never did.

For so long, all I had wanted was to be a part of the “in crowd.” I believed that it would give me a sense of worth or value, but it was a lie. I recall throughout my life bouncing from one group to the next, seeking validation and a sense of belonging, yet never achieving what I so greatly desired. Instead, being a part of the “in crowd” often brought its own disadvantages and dangers.

The world will tell us as Christians that to have worth, you need to be a part of its system. You need to be known in the

world, to be accepted by the world, and to be praised in the world. But that's not what God said. God said in James 4:4 that "friendship with the world is enmity with God". Jesus said that the world would hate us because they first hated Him (John 15:18). Our worth and acceptance should never come from the world, nor should we seek it from them. Instead, we should seek God's approval. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus says to "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;". We should strive to please God and to be accepted by Him. Fortunately for us, God has told us clearly what He asks of us and what things please Him. Righteousness. Generosity. Caring for the poor. Loving one another. God lists many things that please Him. Seek His face and His approval, not that of the "in crowd."

# Chapter 14

## Summer Break

Summer break was a challenging time for me. During the school year, I was always occupied physically. Fall was cross-country season, and spring brought with it track & field, sandwiching my winter sport of soccer. I didn't always play soccer, but I did genuinely enjoy it, especially after I started goalkeeping. That changed soccer completely for me. But when summer came, there was no organized training. At the end of the spring, the cross-country coaches would give us a training schedule for the summer. This schedule allowed for a measure of rest but began to ramp back up as the school year approached slowly. What made this type of training more difficult than traditional practices was the need for self-discipline. During the year, practices were scheduled, coaches were present, and teammates were training alongside one another. But the summer

consisted of you and the road, with nothing but your thoughts to keep you company. No one made me run if I did not want to run. No one made me follow the schedule if I didn't want to. No one made me run the whole distance or for the complete time. Any motivation to train in preparation for the fall season had to come from within me, and I'm ashamed to say that it wasn't always as forthcoming as I would have liked.

When training depended on my own motivation, all manner of excuses seemed sufficient to delay a run. "Oops, I didn't wake up in time. Better luck tomorrow." "Oh, well, I just ate, so I can't run for at least two hours, and by then it'll be dark. Better luck tomorrow." "Oh man, all my running clothes are in the wash. Guess I'll have to wait until I do the laundry." Any number of possible excuses came to mind, turning one missed run into five, then ten, then a month's worth, and before I knew it, Fall orientation was tomorrow and I had run fewer times than I have fingers.



“I thought you enjoyed running?” you might ask, and you would be correct in offering that question. There are lots of things I enjoy about running, but even the best, most entertaining things in life sometimes require work. To truly enjoy running, you must first develop a baseline level of endurance, which requires work: hours and hours, miles and miles of work.

By the time the fall season rolled around, it was evident who had trained and who had not. I soon found that younger runners, who had been slower than I the previous year, now outpaced me significantly. They had trained when no one was looking, and I had not.

You may have heard this phrase or something similar, “character is created in the dark.” Essentially, who you are is not always what people see in public, but rather what they would know if they saw you in secret. What you do when no one’s looking will directly affect your public testimony. I didn’t train when no one was looking, when it was entirely up to me,

and when the public hearing was held, everyone could see what my actions in secret had produced.

If you desire to be a faithful Christian with a genuine testimony, it begins with your private life. Do you read your Bible without someone telling you to? Do you have a time set aside for secret prayer? Jesus would regularly steal away to pray with the Father (Mark 1:35). What thoughts do you allow to fill your mind? Those are the things that will affect your public persona. Sure, you may be able to fake it for a time, but it will eventually become clear that you lack spiritual endurance. You may be able to make it to church on time and answer the Sunday School teacher's questions, but when someone or something truly challenges your faith, the question as to whether you have prepared will be answered. It is then that your training, your time in the word, prayer, and the quality of your meditations, become apparent.

# Chapter 15

## “Core” Strength

Typically, when most people think of running, they think of legs. This is fair, I suppose; it is hard to run without legs. A common misconception, though, is that the only thing runners train is their legs, and that couldn't be further from the truth. God created an amazingly complex machine called the human body, and each of its systems is intricately linked. Don't believe me? Here, I can prove it to you. Go outside and try to run while keeping your arms pinned to your side. Did you try it? How'd it feel? If you're honest, you'll say that it drastically affected your ability to run, making it incredibly difficult and awkward. That's because your arms act as counterweights, balancing your upright frame as it is propelled forward. Without your arms, your body wants to push to the side, rather than completely forward.

Another key part of the body that is integral to running is your core, or your abdominal muscles. If you would, try a second experiment. Try to run while also pushing your belly out with your abs, like a young child would do. Did you find it difficult? Typically, while running, the abdominal muscles contract, creating a bridge between your opposing upper and lower body movements. Sometimes, the core muscles are referred to as the trunk, which connects the branches (arms) to the roots (legs).

So, what happens if your core is weak? After all, if the body is a system that works in synchrony, what happens when part of that system fails? The simple answer is that it negatively impacts your performance. For a runner to perform at their peak ability in a race, they cannot skate by only training their legs. They have to train their entire body, including their core. Today, a movement known as Strength Running is trying to emphasize this fact. When I trained, we routinely

worked our core, using exercises such as leg lifts, Russian twists, and planks. We would actually hold plank challenges to see who could maintain an upright plank the longest. But it strengthened our core muscles and improved our overall performance.

In the Christian life, it can be easy to neglect the heart. Think of the heart as the “core” of the Christian. Some people focus on training their feet. They’ll show up to every meeting under the sun, but none of it changes their heart. Others will train their hands. They’ll serve and do all manner of work, oftentimes without having to be asked. But their hearts remain hard. Many people, including myself, struggle with training their minds above all else. They’ll read books and listen to podcasts. They’ll study the Bible thoroughly, but for the purpose of informing the mind rather than transforming the heart. It has been said that many people will miss Heaven by the distance of 12 inches, roughly the span

between the head and the heart. No one gets saved by learning about Jesus, quoting scripture, or memorizing the concordance. They get saved by believing in Christ's sacrifice in their heart, and by trusting in Him alone.

Luke tells a story in chapter 10, verses 38-42, about two women, Mary and Martha. Martha was "cumbered about with much serving" (verse 40) and came to Jesus complaining about Mary not helping her. Jesus tells her in verses 41-42, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Serving is fine, but nothing should be done at the expense of fostering a relationship with Jesus.

It's important to attend church. It's essential to serve graciously. It's important to study and learn. But it all begins in the heart, and without the heart, the system that God created won't function.

# Chapter 16

## Ignoring the Coach

As an athlete, you sit under the authority and instruction of a coach. This is not merely for pee-wee football or high school sports; even the highest levels of sports, such as the NFL or Olympics, have coaches. Why? Because the athlete doesn't know everything, and the coach, who typically has more knowledge and experience with the sport, can guide the athlete along their journey.

What happens if you ignore the coach? Well, you will fall short of your potential at best and fail hard or get injured at worst. There were times when I ignored my coach's instructions, and it cost me. The biggest instruction I ignored from my coaches was to train in the summer, as I mentioned earlier. This significantly impacted my running career and prevented me from reaching my full potential. I recall times during races,

when as I approached a mile marker, my coach would urge me to speed up because my split (my time for each mile in a multi-mile race) was too slow to reach my goal. My coach had the goal in mind, and I had finishing in mind. I decided to continue at the pace I was going and finished disappointingly, all because I ignored the instructions of my coach, who knew better than I did and was more aware of my limitations than I was.

In the Christian life, we have coaches, including parents, pastors, and teachers. The question is whether we listen to them or not. Do we take the time to hear them and allow their wisdom to seep into our lives? When I look at my life and list my greatest regrets, the one at the top is how little I was home during my college years.

I began college during my junior year of high school through the dual enrollment program. This was a great program, as it allowed me to graduate with my Associate of Arts degree before I



graduated from high school, thereby cutting a year off my Bible college attendance. But there were downsides. Because I had to drive to college each day, I began to become accustomed to being away from home in an independent way. This is a regular part of growing up, of course, but my desire to make friends and quench the loneliness I felt led to filling my schedule with all manner of outings. After the youth group on Wednesday nights, I'd go with some friends to the local Sonic drive-in for corn dogs. I started attending the school's football games and participating in the spirit club, partly because I wanted to be perceived as "social" and partly because the girl I liked was an active attendee. As I entered my senior year of high school and then began attending full-time Bible college, I found more reasons to be absent from home. I recall that during my time in Bible college, I would attend class at 8 am and stay until the end of the day, then go to work. When I worked at UPS, I'd go to work and then come back to campus to

hang out with friends until the wee hours of the morning before going home and doing it all over again. Even my weekends consisted of going to campus and spending time with friends. To put it simply: I was never home.

At the time, I didn't think much of it. I was engrossed in my world, and my schedule was full, or rather, I had made it so. I slept at home, but I never spent time there. Rarely did I even eat there. Even when my dad was diagnosed with cancer and began to endure painful radiation treatments silently, I still valued time with my friends at school over being home with him. My chores were never done, and my parents' reproofs were deadened with the fact that I was a mostly good kid who was going to Bible college. I can still remember my dad, definitely in pain, with an arm swollen from cancer treatments, mowing the grass because I "forgot" once again. Looking back, now that he is gone, I weep realizing what my laziness and selfishness forced him to endure. He was

willing to tolerate it because he loved my mom and me, but he shouldn't have had to. The 18-year-old "man" should have helped him. The regret I feel for forgetting my family during this time has become a motivation for me. Whenever I'm home in Jacksonville, I try to take care of whatever needs my mom has around the house, because my dad is no longer here, and when he was, I was too selfish to help.

But even more than the missed opportunity to be a blessing to my parents, I regret the missed time. The hundreds of hours when my mom and dad were at home, available to talk to and learn from, were wasted. They were thrown down the bottomless pit of mindless banter, with people who haven't spoken to me in years. I wonder at what wisdom I missed out on, wisdom that I needed to be an adult to understand, but when that time came, I was too "independent" to think I needed any wisdom or advice. What a fool I was! At the time, being at home and forced to do

chores was oppressive, while the world seemed freeing. However, I now realize that the world is the truly oppressive agent, keeping me from the place where people genuinely loved and cared for me.

Why do I bring this up? Because you may still have time. Don't ignore the coaches in your life. Your mom and dad won't be here forever. Your pastor may not be here forever, or God may not have you in your church forever. Don't waste the time you have with them. They have lived the life you have yet to live and walked the paths you have yet to walk. Listen to them. Speed up when they tell you to. Don't allow the world to pull you away from the coaches God has placed in your life. The world is not freedom; it is bondage.

# Chapter 17

## Donning the Spikes

As a competitive runner, it doesn't take long to notice how minor tweaks and changes can significantly affect your performance. Simple things, such as the weight of your clothing, can determine your placement and timing. One advantage that radically improved my racing was discovering spikes. Racing spikes are lightweight shoes that have spikes protruding from the ball area of your foot. Different length spikes are used for different races, with longer spikes meant for long-distance trail running, and shorter ones designed for track running. Not only do the spikes enhance your ability to grip the ground, but racing spikes are significantly lighter than regular training shoes, so much so that I had to alter my gait slightly to accommodate them. Wearing racing spikes was part of how I managed to break the 20-minute barrier and earn my PR

finally. It's incredible how such seemingly small things, like the weight of your clothes and shoes, can impact your ability to race.

The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ is our foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11). Receiving Him is the starting point in our Christian journey, but it is not the entirety of it. We have our whole life to live, seeking to be more conformed to the image of Christ. We could do just the bare minimum: pray over our food, go to church on Christmas and Easter, give a little money for the youth group's mission trip, and skate along through life. But we'll never grow doing that. We'll never progress in the Christian life, and we certainly won't be conformed to the image of Christ. Just like how wearing lighter clothes and racing spikes will improve your race automatically, there are many things that you can incorporate into your life to grow as a Christian.

The first is reading your Bible. It's hard to know how to live as a Christian

when you fail to read the manual that God left us with. It's also hard to authentically say we love God when we won't listen to His words. The second thing is prayer. Just like with reading the Bible, it's hard to say we love God when we won't speak to Him in prayer. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Prayer is a tremendous privilege, and not one we should waste. Thirdly, join a church and assemble regularly. The church is the primary means that God uses to edify us and lift our spirits. The assembling of the church is a time when we are taught and preached to, where we fellowship together with other believers, and partake together in the Lord's supper. Hebrews 10:25 says, "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." The Lord urges us to treat the church as valuable and not to forsake it. Instead, as the day of Christ's return approaches, we

should seek to gather together more frequently. The old saying says, “It takes three to thrive” (Sunday morning, night, and Wednesday night). When the doors of the church house are open, we should be there if at all possible. No, this isn’t legalism; I don’t think going to church makes you a “better person,” but it will help you in your Christian life. Lastly, be a soul-winner. In your day-to-day life, tell people about Jesus. Tell people about how He saved you and changed your life forever. When your church has soul-winning outreaches, try to go. It will be a blessing, not just to those with whom you may share the gospel, but to you as well. Perhaps you’re thinking, “I just don’t really feel like it” or “I don’t think I could do that.” Let me encourage you to act, rather than think. Even the apostle Paul said, “For that which I do I allow not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that I do” (Romans 7:15). Paul struggled with wanting to do the right thing, but he still did them. In Proverbs 16:3, we are told, “Commit thy works unto



the LORD, And thy thoughts shall be established”. Getting up to do the task God wants us to do will change our feelings regarding that thing.

I know that any progress I have made in my Christian life would not have been possible if I had not pursued God’s will in these areas. There are no downsides to donning the spikes; they’ll only make you faster!

# Chapter 18

## Sick Days

We are all accustomed to the concept of sick days. We catch a cold, so we stay home from work or school, load up on DayQuil, and watch TV. Apparently, my cross-country coach did not learn that when she was in school. Not coming to practice because we were sick was simply unacceptable (especially if we had already been at school). You may be thinking, “won’t being sick make it harder to run?”, and the answer to that question would be “yes.” However, what my coach was convinced of, and what I have since learned, is that exercising when you have a common cold or a similar illness is actually beneficial for you. Breathing in fresh air and getting your blood pumping all helped to kick the cold.

I recall one time I had COVID, so I had to stay home. I felt like I had a cold of some kind, and I wanted some fresh air (at

that time, the very mention of COVID locked you indoors for two weeks). So, I decided to go for a run. I didn't go near anyone or touch anyone; I just went running. And I felt great! The people I talked to about my run didn't understand, and that is... well... understandable.

When we were running cross country in school, none of us wanted to run while we were sick. It didn't make sense to us. But by listening to our coach, and running, albeit a little slower and easier, we got better sooner than we would've by sitting on a couch in a dark, stuffy room. As I'm writing this, in fact, I have a cold. I ran two miles on the track at the YMCA this morning, and my symptoms have been cut in half.

Sometimes in the Christian life, you get beat down. Whether it's simple weariness from all the serving around the church, a long week of work and revival services, or some spiritual, emotional, or physical burden you're struggling with, the answer is not to stop. The world will

tell you to stop. Your body will tell you to stop. Perhaps even those who love you will advise you to stop. But they are wrong. The answer is not to stop but rather to seek help from other believers while you continue forward. Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” A little later in verse 9, Paul says, “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.” Don’t allow yourself to become weary in doing good. If you become overwhelmed, seek help from fellow Christians in the church. Slow down a little, perhaps, but never stop. The Christian life is too short to stop. There is too much work to be done to kill our momentum. Yes, you may feel like you have a cold. But run anyway.

# Chapter 19

## Stay on the Path

As I mentioned in Chapter 8, there can be many obstacles that come into your path when running. It is the goal of those who love us to mark as many barriers as they can, but some still get through. But what if a second path were to open up? A path that seemed like a shortcut. One that seemed safer and easier to traverse. Shouldn't we take it? The answer may not always be yes.

In cross-country races, your course is clearly defined. If you go outside of the clearly marked boundaries, you will be disqualified from the race. Many races nowadays actually use GPS chips that are attached to your racing bib or shoelaces to see whether you left the course. In this case, it would be unwise to go a different route.

In track, however, the answer changes from a firm “no” to “it depends.”

For races 800 meters and longer (as well as relay races that total longer than 800 meters), you must stay in your lane until you pass the converge mark. This is typically a line or series of cones that tells the runners it is legal to move from their lane into the innermost lane. This is important because, since the track is oval, runners who stay on the outside actually run about 3.5 meters more per turn than the innermost lane, adding distance and losing any time advantage. Races shorter than that must stay in their lane for the duration of the race, but their starting lines are staggered to accommodate the added distance.

But what would happen if I decided to converge before the line? I'd be disqualified, and my whole squad as well, if it were a relay race. What if I chose to stay in my lane after I crossed the converge line? Then I would be wasting valuable time.

There are times in the Christian life when God will lead us to "change lanes."

For most of my high school years, I thought I would be a Marine or a police officer. Today, I'm a pastor three states north of where I grew up. I didn't expect to change lanes, but when God made it abundantly clear that I was no longer on the right path, I moved.

Be careful, however, about changing lanes prematurely. The Bible tells us that “with a multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14). Don't forget to get adequate counsel. Speak to your pastor, spouse, and parents. Pray diligently, fast if needed, and read God's Word. It can be challenging, and sometimes impossible, to turn back after changing lanes.

# Chapter 20

## False Start

Perhaps you've heard the phrase "false start." Colloquially, we use the phrase to describe someone who begins something but doesn't get much further than that beginning point. In a race, a false start occurs when a runner leaves the starting line before the gun goes off. While many starters (the one who fires the pistol to start a race) will show grace to a genuine mistake, a false start is grounds for disqualification.

I remember one particular race when, for whatever reason, there were three or four people who false-started multiple times in a row. The starter grew furious, and his face was turning red. I learned that the starter was not a Christian, because he used extensive profanity to essentially say that anyone who falsely started again would be disqualified. The point was made because



he was finally able to fire the starting pistol without someone prematurely stepping.

Why do people false start, you may ask? Most of those who false start do so because they are too close to the starting line and are leaning over it to gain an advantage. Excitement takes them a little too far, and gravity takes them the rest of the way. In order not to fall, they step... right over the line. Some dummies actually try to run early, but they are rare. The accidental step was the most common false start in my running career.

Thinking about false starting, two lessons come to my mind. The first is the importance of patience. Before you can leave the starting line, the starter must call the runners to the line. Then he'll say something like, "Runners, ready, set..." and then he'll fire the gun. You don't run at "ready," nor do you run at "set." You run when the gun goes off. Wait for the gun, and don't get ahead of God or yourself. God has a plan for your life, and you have

limitations. Be willing to wait if the situation demands it, and don't worry: the gun will go off.

Second, don't hover near the line. When I say line, I'm referring to sin. Our society today asks the question, "How close to sin can I get and still be okay?" That is the wrong question. The Bible calls us to holiness (1 Peter 1:16). The person seeking holiness instead asks, "How far away from sin can I flee?" The Bible tells us time and again to flee temptation. In 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul urges Timothy to "Flee also youthful lusts". Don't seek to get as close to sin as you can without touching. Gravity will take effect, and you will fall right down into the depths of sin. If you're nowhere near the line, you can't fall over it.

# Chapter 21

## Up the Hill

Imagine you're walking down the street, and you find yourself approaching a steep hill. What do you do? Some may turn around and go back home. Others may try to see if there is a way around the hill that is flatter and easier to traverse. Still others may trudge slowly up the hill until they make it to the top. In competitive running, none of these choices is viable.

Occasionally, in a race, you will encounter a hill. This is, of course, done on purpose to challenge the runners and make the race more difficult. You cannot go back to the starting line; in a race, you only run forward. You cannot try to find an easier path; the boundaries are clearly marked. Your only option is to go up the hill. But how do you go up? Most, like I said, will slowly work their way up the hill, trying to conserve energy for the

easier terrain to follow, and even though this may seem sensible to most, it is the opposite of what you actually want to do in a race.

Two races come to my mind when I think of hills. The first was at Florida State University for a special “varsity only” meet. The race consisted of two laps through the wooded area of the property, interrupted by a long field, about three or so football fields in length. Halfway through the wooded area was a long and steep hill, waiting imposingly for the runners to challenge.

The second race was at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. This race was particularly unique in that the starting line was actually at the bottom of a hill, meaning you started the race by running up the hill.

To effectively conquer the hill, you have to run “into it.” You must shorten your strides (the length of your steps) and pump your arms faster so that you work your way up the hill. By working up the

hill rather than slowly going up it, you not only are going to pass runners in front of you, but you will also have accumulated momentum, carrying you past more runners once you reach the top.

People make the mistake of thinking that if they work too hard to get up the hill, they will have no energy left afterward. This is simply false. Instead, because you worked up the hill, you can rest as your momentum carries you down and onto the flat terrain. So is the Christian life.

As a Christian, you will come up to difficult times, times when you will want to turn around, find another way, or just slowly endure. The Bible tells us, however, that these times of difficulty are actually for our benefit. In Romans 5:3-5, we see “And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in

our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” James also mentions that “the trying of your faith worketh patience” (James 1:3b).

Hard times will only keep us down if we let them. If we trust God in those moments and work to see tribulations through God's eyes, as tools that can make us better Christians, then we will have the motivation to work up those hills. Don't view hard times like the world does. View them like God does. Tackle them head-on and let the momentum carry you forward into victory.

# Chapter 22

## Light Up the Dark

If you think about it, you've probably seen runners at all times of day and night. Runners are people, just like you, and we have to fit running into our schedules. This often means that we have to run early in the morning or later in the evening. When you're running in an urban or suburban area, this can create a host of problems. In 2020, it was reported that over 122,000 walkers, runners, and cyclists were injured annually after being hit by cars. <sup>1</sup> In that same year, it was reported that almost 7,500 of those pedestrians died from their injuries. <sup>2</sup> 16%

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<sup>1</sup> "122,000 Runners Injured Annually by Vehicles," Pisanchyn Law Firm, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://pisanchynlawfirm.com/news/122000-runners-injured-annually-vehicles/>.

<sup>2</sup> USAFacts team, "How many pedestrians and cyclists are killed by cars in America?," USAFacts, last modified April 4, 2023, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://usafacts.org/articles/how-many-pedestrians-and-cyclists-are-killed-by-cars-in-america/>.

of those pedestrians injured didn't live to run again. That is a sobering statistic. And it is also why many runners do (and those who don't, should) wear reflective gear while running.

When I go for a run at night, I wear a neon yellow reflective belt. I also typically wear an armband and a clip on the back of my shoe that flashes a light. Why? Because I want people to see me in a dark environment. When I go running in the dark, death becomes a possibility, but when I introduce light into the darkness, life has a chance to thrive.

Our world is described in similar ways. In Matthew 5:14, Jesus says, "Ye are the light of the world." He then urges us in verse 16 to "Let your light so shine before men." In 1 John 1:5, the Bible tells us that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." The world is darkness, but God is light. When we choose to operate in the sin of the world, we choose to grope blindly in the darkness of the world, and where there is darkness, there



is death. John 3:19 says, “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” Where there was no light, there was now light. The Light of the world, Jesus, had come. But, both in Jesus’ time and in our own, people choose to love darkness rather than light. If someone dies with the love of darkness continuing to grow in their hearts, then darkness is what they will get, for all eternity. Matthew 8:12 says, “But the children of the kingdom [of Satan] shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

What choice have you made in your life? Have you chosen to love the darkness of the world? Have the sins and vices of Satan lured you into complacency regarding your ultimate fate? If you choose to love darkness, then darkness is what you will get. But if you choose to love the Light, you will spend a glorious

eternity with Him in a night-less day  
(Revelation 22:5).

# Chapter 23

## Trying Again

I mentioned before how I didn't qualify for my first race, and only the grace of my coaches permitted me to run. There were many times in my running career when I failed the first time. Difficulties I thought had been conquered, I had to struggle through anew. One example of this was plateauing. For weeks, I would consistently improve my time, getting faster as each race was run, only to hit a figurative wall where there would be little to no improvement. This happens in everyday life as well, and I distinctly recall a terrible struggle I had to endure time and again.

Earlier, I recounted the story of my battle with self-harm and all that surrounded it. That experience eventually led me to the foot of the cross, after which I was certain I would never have to

struggle with those feelings again. I was wrong.

Shortly thereafter, I began Bible college, which was an enjoyable experience for the most part. I worked hard to make friends, and for a time, there seemed to be fruit born from those efforts. However, about halfway through my time at Bible college, I began to struggle again, and I started to feel some cracks forming.

I had surrendered to the call to preach the semester before, and I was still processing what that meant for my life. I began the spring semester with a frighteningly heavy course load. Apologetics on Tuesday night meant late classes cutting into my study time. Trying to learn both Hebrew and Greek meant my mind was always in a state of confusion, and working as an extended education coach at the elementary school where I had grown up (Trinity Christian Academy) required my attention both before and after school. I was spread far too thin, and I was burning out.

I remember sitting outside the college café with the large whiteboard I carried everywhere, practicing my Greek and Hebrew declensions. I never did get them right, and I began to fall behind. I eventually had to visit the college registrar (who was also my Hebrew teacher) and change my major from Intensive Bible to Pastoral Theology, so that I could drop Apologetics and Hebrew. He was, fortunately, very kind and considerate about the matter, and he remains one of my favorite professors from my time there.

I continued to struggle, however, despite these changes, and this led to a terrible situation. The story I'm about to tell you is very difficult for me to speak of, but I believe God can use it to help others, just as He ultimately used it to grow and bolster my faith in Him.

In my sophomore year of college, I was friends with a girl who seemed to be struggling just as much as I was. She had struggled with depression and self-harm,

too, and the stress of this time in her life led to a resurgence of self-harm. For several days, she had ghosted me and several of her closest friends, and the next time we saw her, she was wearing bandages on her arms. This event triggered something in me. We were very close, far too close, I now realize in hindsight. We had developed a codependent relationship, which, according to Google's Gemini AI, is defined as "a relationship pattern where one person is excessively reliant on another for emotional support, validation, or a sense of purpose, often at the expense of their own well-being".<sup>3</sup> When one of us was sad, we both were sad, and when one of us was elated, so was the other. This event, along with the significant stresses in my life at this time, led me to feel utterly out of control. I felt like things were just happening to me; that I had no

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<sup>3</sup> Google. (2025). Gemini (2.5 flash).

<https://gemini.google.com/app/33c4ca664f10a8ff>

ability to organize and determine things, and I soon found myself returning to the very act that brought me a sense of control years before: self-harm.

One Thursday evening, standing in the shower, I picked up the razor blade and began to make shallow cuts into my arm. I remember feeling completely numb at this point, as if I had been drugged. This all changed when I made the final cut. I accidentally cut far too deep into my arm, revealing my subcutaneous layer of fat and opening three small arteries. It was as if a bomb had gone off in my brain, triggering my survival instincts, and I was immediately aware of what was happening. I tried to staunch the bleeding but was ultimately unsuccessful. I eventually wrapped my arm in a wet cloth and went to bed, not sure what would happen next.

Later that evening, I began to hear people rustling in the bathroom next to my bedroom. This was odd because generally no one but me had any reason to

go there. My heart dropped, and I began to listen intently. “Will they pull back the shower curtain and see the blood in the shower?” I thought. “What will happen to me if they find out what I’ve done?”

They did, in fact, pull back the curtain and see the product of my actions, and my mom burst into my room demanding to know what had happened. As a nurse, she saw my arm and knew I had to go to the doctor. As I was going out to the car, my dad said things that hurt me, but that I’m sure he regretted later. It’s hard for people who’ve never experienced these struggles with mental health to understand what someone is going through, and sometimes they lash out in fear and ignorance. I try not to hold it against people.

The doctor at the Mayo Clinic stitched me up (13 stitches on the last cut alone) and called the mental health clinic. In Florida, and perhaps other states as well, if a physician believes someone may be a danger to themselves or others, they



can have them detained under something called the Baker Act.

I ended up riding an ambulance to the River Point Behavioral Health Center and getting dropped off in the foyer. I spent five days at this clinic, and while the staff were generally pretty friendly, I left that place realizing that the forces I struggled with were not simply a mental health disorder. As I sat there, reading the NIV Bible that they had on the public shelf, I read story after story of people who struggled like I did, only it wasn't because of mental health. Mark 9 told me about a boy who was constantly tossed into the fire and water. This boy is described as foaming at the mouth, gnashing his teeth, and pining away. I read in Mark 5 and elsewhere about a man who lived naked in the caves, screaming and gnashing his teeth, and cutting himself with stones. Matthew 5 told me about a dumb (mute) man, and Luke 13 about a woman who was crippled and bowed over. What did all

these sufferers share in common? They were afflicted by devils.

1 Peter 5:8 tells us to “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” The Devil has a desire to destroy us, and he isn’t opposed to trying any means necessary.

When I saw the accounts of all those people in the Bible, I prayed and asked God to help me, to protect me from the attacks of the wicked one and his devils, and keep me safe. And He has. He has remained faithful to me.

I don’t know what you’re going through. Perhaps you’ve hit that figurative plateau in your life, and you’re not growing past it. You don’t understand why you can’t get faster. Give it to Jesus. Just because we think we’ve defeated something in the past doesn’t mean Satan won’t try to bring back the Greatest Hits. It just means we have to turn once again to the Savior who rescued us the first time.

# Chapter 24

## A-Cross the Country

As a long-distance runner, you have the opportunity to see so much that people zooming by in cars don't see. I can't begin to list the number of times I have noticed something special by running a path that I have driven down a hundred times.

In school, I was able to explore every square inch of our campus. I already told you about some of the places, such as Lake Victory and the Satan Shack, but there were others as well. Back behind the marching band practice field, there was a path through the woods that we used for our time trials. For the longest time, there was a beautiful natural bridge made of earth and tree roots that spanned a small creek. It was truly one of a kind, but sadly it did eventually collapse. Elsewhere on campus, I found a small arched metal bridge lying in the woods, which I pulled

over to span a small culvert, allowing me to access a new area.

Occasionally, we would find other places to run, typically downtown Jacksonville or Cecil Field. Downtown Jacksonville has a beautiful skyline with its numerous bridges, and it was always a treat to run up and down the Acosta and Mainstreet bridges, effectively running laps over the St. John's River. Our course would take us past Friendship Fountain and down the Landing (which unfortunately no longer exists following a shooting in 2018). We'd run past the Maxwell House coffee plant and smell the roasting coffee beans, ultimately ending back at the bus parked next to the YMCA.

At Cecil Field, we'd run down to a large earth-moving operation, where huge retention pond digs had resulted in mesa-style, flat-topped hills scattered about. My friends and I would race up the side to see who'd get there first. We'd also run through the woods there and find all manner of interesting spiders and bugs

before the fat, warm rain inevitably began to fall. It was a wonderful time.

As a runner, it can be easy to see every place through the eyes of running. We're constantly on the lookout for new and exciting places to lace up our sneakers and explore. It is with that kind of vision that we should live as Christians. Everywhere we go, everyone we meet is an opportunity to speak about Jesus.

As of the writing of this book, I have had the privilege to travel across the United States, to California, Texas, Mississippi, Missouri, and elsewhere. I have had the blessing of walking the halls of Congress and the North Carolina General Assembly. God has allowed me to visit Mexico, Germany, and the Czech Republic, and in all of those places, I find the same kinds of people: saved and lost. In Washington, D.C., I've met members of Congress who have given me clear testimonies of faith in Christ, and others who believed in no God at all. I'll never forget the man I met in Puerto Vallarta,

Mexico, who described his story of coming out of Roman Catholicism and finding faith in Christ alone. He now attends a Baptist church, despite his family's opposition, and routinely uploads videos to YouTube about his newfound faith. I continue to pray for a man named Joseph, whom we met in Prague, Czech Republic. Both he and his fiancée (an American from Indiana) had been raised Catholic, which is especially interesting if you are familiar with the atheistic culture of Czechia. He allowed us to have a lengthy and deep conversation with him about the Baptist (Christian) faith, and I was able to share the Gospel with him thoroughly.

What am I saying? We live in a big world, and the only reason we still do is because God has given us a mission. In Mark 16:15, Jesus provides us with this command. "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Just as a runner always has an eye open for the next great running location, as Christians, we should have our eyes open

for the next soul who needs to hear the Gospel. This is why we are here, and there is no better calling.

# Conclusion

I pray that these few stories of my life and running career were of benefit to you. If we listen, God is willing to teach us important lessons through the difficulties of life. Early on, I used to ask God, “Why me?” Why did I have to go through the struggles I went through? I now believe that to be the wrong question. I still ask, “Why me?” but not regarding struggles. I now stand amazed and ask, “Why would you save me?” What was so special about me that God would come down from Heaven and die on a cross? Why would He love me so radically and unconditionally that, despite my gross and repeated sins, He would show me mercy and grace?

One of my pastors once said, “Don’t ask why the rose bush has thorns. Ask why the thorn bush has roses.” We are not good people, and we deserve no good thing. Romans 3:23 tells us that “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Despite our sin, God in His infinite mercy has offered us a good thing. He has



provided us the gift of eternal life through His Son, Jesus (Romans 6:23).

If, after reading this book, your conclusion is “man, he went through a lot of stuff,” you’ve missed the point. My prayer is that you can conclude, “man, he serves a great God,” and I hope and pray that you will serve Him too.