

FOCUSED WORSHIP

What is the best date you ever had? What are the memories? What made it memorable? One of mine was on a moonlit night in the country of Namibia on the West Coast of Africa. I was in Namibia with a group of fellow college students attending a series of revival tent meetings where we were invited to lead the singing and represent our College to recruit new students. One of the college students was a lady who happened to be my first ever serious date. I was head over heels in love with this newly found goddess of my life.

It was a cloudless sky. If the Namibian dessert night air was chilly, I did not feel it. I was walking with the love of my life on a sandy trail past high desert thorn trees to the massive wall of a reservoir dam above the campsite where the main meeting tent was pitched.

The moon rose and sent a shimmer of light across the lake that seemed to rise right up to where we were sitting with our feet dangling over the dam wall. I don't remember one word I said, but who of us remembers what we say when we are overwhelmed with feelings of twitter-pated love anyway. The content doesn't matter. It's the deeper communication of the feeling of joy, exhilaration, and admiration, that flows from one heart to another. It's the moment of a shared presence, being there fully for each other, amplified by the gentle touch of a hand, or her head resting on my shoulder.

What happened on that moonlit night on a dam wall in the Namibian dessert? What was said, is not important, but what was experienced is forever. Communication was profound. It was intimate and focused. I was fully present, with no distractions, so fully engaged with presence of mind and soul, that when we got up to leave, I left her box of caramel candies (her favorite) on the cement wall where we had been sitting. They probably became the sport or pleasure of a troop of baboons that passed there the next day.

In an age of A.D.D.-like gadgets, such as smartphones and frenetic electronic game activity, when people's brains are trained to run non-stop, in a go-go-go hive of busy-ness, with little or no sleep to restore and slow down brain activity, is it any wonder that we are producing a generation of energizer bunnies? Tension-related diseases are at an all-time high, resulting in a pharmaceutical boom. We have created a distracted society. Distraction has become the norm. I predict a time when calm, steady, focused attention will be an oddity, a rare phenomenon to prize and cherish.

How does this craziness impact spirituality and the spiritual disciplines? How do I read the Bible or pray with focused attention? Distraction has become the devil's most successful tool. If I can't focus on Him, how can I experience a meaningful date with Him? How can I spend that "thoughtful hour" with Him each day contemplating His sufferings on Calvary?

Christ-focused mindfulness is becoming a lost art and never more needed than today; to sit at the feet of Jesus like Mary and listen to every word from His lips. Is your home blessed with a time each day when the TV is turned off and cell phones silenced, when the family gathers around the Word to hear God's voice without the distractions of our fast-paced technological gizmos, that demand our immediate attention to read the next tweet, whoosh, or ding-dong message?

I'm so glad there were none of these distractions in 1969 on that moonlit night in Namibia. It may just have ruined the relationship, and with it all the dreams of my marrying the love of my life.

We live in a world of devices and distractions! And Christians are a soft target for the devil. He first distracted Eve and then led her to doubt. And he still uses the same tool today with great success. Satan

says, "I will conquer today's Christians with DISTRACTION!" He distracted Adam and Eve with an APPLE, and he distracts modern Christians with an APPLE (phone) . . . or a Samsung!

What is the only antidote for distraction?

Philippians 3:13-14 NLT ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it [perfection], but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race [*a finisher*] and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

Why are we so easily distracted by what this world offers?

As C. S. Lewis put it in his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," "...if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Hebrews 12:1-2 NLT Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. ² We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.

2 Timothy 4:7-8 NLT ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. ⁸ And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his appearing.

How are you running your race? Are you a finisher?

When you look at the cloud of witnesses from the past, did they finish the race?

- There was Job who faced unimaginable suffering, and he finished;
- there's David who committed adultery and murder, and he finished;
- there's John the Baptist, with his strange diet and bizarre wardrobe, and he finished;
- there's John the quitter, who ran when Jesus was arrested, and he finished;
- there's Peter who denied that he knew Him, and he finished;
- and Mary the prostitute, and she finished;
- and Stephen who was hated and stoned, and he finished;
- and Paul who went through many trials, and he finished;
- and Martin Luther, who got kicked out of his church, and he finished;
- and John Calvin, who in spite of great opposition, persevered, and he finished;

- and missionary William Carey, an infamous plodder, and he finished;
- and there's grandparents, and uncles and aunts, and friends, who've gone before us, and they all finished.

What is the prize for marathon races? A finisher medal and shirt!

What's the key to finishing a race? Don't get distracted. Keep your eye/mind on the end goal – Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 26:3 NLT ³ You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!

My wife Bev and I went on a hike along a wild and uninhabited coast in South Africa. The path led us along the beach which was at times smooth sand, or rocky, and at other times we were faced with sheer rocky cliffs. At one such a challenge the path led us up onto a cliff with a narrow ledge of about a foot wide, then it narrowed to about 9 inches and later to about 6 inches. With heavy back-packs we had to push against the rock face to prevent losing our balance and being pulled down in the churning ocean below. Fear gripped Bev who froze and could not continue. There was no way she could return. This was a one-way hike. Forward was the only way.

Solution? I told her to look at me and to not look down. I held her hand and ever so slowly she put one foot in front of the other until she reached the safety of the other side.

Lesson? When you're gripped by fear and the storms of life threaten to pull you down into the abyss of sin, then keep your eyes on Jesus, and put one foot forward at a time until you reach the safety of the other side.

John 1:29 NIV ²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face;
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

The author and composer of this hymn, Helen H. Lemmel, relates that one day, in 1918, a missionary friend gave her a tract entitled "Focused." The pamphlet contained these words: "So then, turn your eyes upon Him, look full into His face and you will find that the things of earth will acquire a strange new dimness. " Author and Composer --Helen H. Lemmel, 1864-1961 – born in England and died in Seattle (97 yrs).