

***Fix Your Eyes upon Jesus***  
**Hebrews 11:32-12:2**

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Fix your eyes on Jesus. We are so fortunate to have a passage of scripture like the one found in Hebrews 12. Hebrews eleven is known as the chapter on faith, and it lifts up a veritable who's who of God's faithful saints. But everyone who is mentioned in Hebrews eleven has one thing in common. They never saw Jesus. They all came before Jesus. They could never fix their eyes on Jesus. We can. And what stands out most to the author of Hebrews is that Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and he has now sat down on a heavenly throne at the right hand of God.

We had a favorite song we sang with our youth group. It was called, "Jesus my Lord?" All throughout the song the question is asked, "Have you seen Jesus my Lord?" I think the author of the song might have been from Rhode Island, maybe even Westerly. Think of the beautiful sunsets we have as the sky lights up at the fading sun.

***"Have you ever looked at the sunset with the sky mellowing red? And the clouds suspended like feathers? Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord."***

The second verse might have been at Weekapaug, or Misquamicut, or Watch Hill, or Charlestown, or...you get the idea.

***"Have you every stood at the ocean with the white foam at your feet? Felt the endless thundering motion? Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord."***

Have you ever seen Jesus, be it in the sunset or in the roaring waves? A friend of mine spoke at a conference I was leading. He was a young, rugged guy, and he loved the outdoors. When he came to speak he had grown a beard and his hair was long. Plus, he had a fairly dark complexion. When he walked into the conference room I did a double take. I thought Jesus had showed up. The conference was at a coastal town, so during free time we all headed to the beach. He and I started body surfing, and the waves were perfect. One wave in particular still stands out in my mind. We were both riding it toward the shore, and I looked over at my friend. His head was sticking out of the water, and with his dark complexion, his long hair, and his beard. I got just about the happiest thought I have ever had. I thought, "I'm body surfing with Jesus." Have you seen Jesus my Lord? Why wouldn't Jesus play with us at the beach and jump into the surf and laugh with us and enjoy the goodness of life? He loves us. Surely he delights in our joy and our laughter.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord? I hope you have. Actually, I am fairly certain you have. If you have been watching the Summer Olympics from Rio de Janeiro, there is almost a 100 percent chance you have seen Jesus. Rising high above the city of Rio is Christ the Redeemer, this huge statue of Jesus. He looks down on the city. During the opening ceremonies there were shots of the sparkling beaches, of the stadiums and coliseums and various venues, of the crowds celebrating and the music playing the people dancing. Towering over it all was a statue of Jesus, Christ the Redeemer, watching over the whole city.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord? In Rio he is standing tall and his arms are open, spread wide to invite and welcome and receive all his precious children. Have you seen Jesus my Lord? He is calling to us, to ones who have come from all corners of the world to participate and compete and support and cheer during the Olympics. “Come unto me,” he said once. Come unto me not just you athletes and you corporate sponsors and spectators, come unto me even all who are weary and heavy laden. He stretches his arms out to invite all of his children to come and he promises, “I will give you rest.”

Christ the Redeemer statue is actually a profound symbol, for we have heard stories as we watch these Summer Olympics of the great poverty in Rio and in Brazil. There are numerous slums known as *favelas*. Side by side with the wealth and the glamour and the star-studded Olympics is another world where people are suffering from poverty, from drugs, gangs, violence, facing terrible sanitation issues and struggling to find hope in a desperate situation. Christ the Redeemer is high above Rio, and Christ is watching out for all of his children.

When I was studying to be a pastor one of my seminary professors had me read a book about a Christian leader from Japan. His name was Toyohiko Kagawa. “Kagawa was born in Kobe to Kame and Junichi Kagawa...Following the death of his parents at age four, he met Harry W. Myers and Charles A. Logan, missionaries of the (Southern) Presbyterian Church, U.S., and was baptized by Myers on February 14, 1904, at the Tokushima church. He pursued theological study at Meiji Gakuin in Tokyo and Kobe Theological Seminary. During his student days in Kobe he moved into the Shinkawa slum to serve the physical and spiritual needs of some 7,500 people.”<sup>1</sup> My professor had studied the life of Kagawa carefully, and in his telling of the story Kagawa went to the seminary in Japan and the seminary sat high above the city. But Kagawa knew the struggles that people in the city faced. So one day he left the walls of the seminary and went to the slums. Kagawa left the protection of the seminary with its walls that was high above the city and he moved into the slums.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Fukada, “Kagawa, Toyohiko” in Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1998)

I don't know if Toyohiko Kagawa ever saw Christ the Redeemer statue, the statue that stands high above Rio. But Kagawa understood something about the Jesus who is depicted in that statue. Although he does stand above us and call us to his side, he does more than that. He comes down from high and safe and lofty places to be with the broken, the suffering, the shamed, the victims, the tired, the weary, and the oppressed, the ones who hunger and thirst, the ones who have no clothes to wear and no place to sleep and who are sick and in prison. I wonder if Toyohiko Kagawa left the safety and security of the seminary walls because he wanted to see Jesus, and he knew right where Jesus would be.

One of the lowest times in the history of Israel was when they were enslaved and oppressed in Egypt. They were forced to work in terrible conditions, they had no rights, and their lives meant nothing. Their evil oppressor even ordered their children to be put to death. Into that world of suffering Moses was born, and God protected Moses and guided him until one day God appeared to Moses in the Midian desert. God appeared in the burning bush. I learned that story as a child. I read it countless times in seminary and as a pastor. One day the verses in Exodus three spoke to me in a new way. It was a powerful realization. God appears to Moses and says, "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers. I am concerned about their suffering." And then God says, "I have come down to help."

I had read that passage countless times when the light finally went on. Jesus does not stand far above our suffering and struggles. His life embodies the words God spoke to Moses. He sees our suffering. He hears our cries. He is concerned. Even though he is high and exalted, even though he is the Son of God and the King of kings and Lord of lords, he comes down to help. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. His name is Emmanuel, for he is God with us. When the leper begs Jesus to make him clean Jesus is not only willing to do that, he reaches out and touches the leper. In the Gospel of Mark we read Jesus is indignant at the sorry condition of the leper, indignant that one of God's children should live in such sorrow. But other manuscripts tell us Jesus had compassion. And we believe both are true. Jesus is indignant at the suffering we face, and at the same time filled with compassion. So whether it is was indignation or compassion, Jesus did not keep a safe distance. He touched the man.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord? Oh, he rises high above us and he stretches his arms wide enough to cover all of our sadness and crying and pain, saying come unto me. And he also makes the journey into our world. He walks a mile in our shoes. And then when we take our shoes off he wraps a towel around his waist and washes our feet. The greatest bows down in humility. He becomes the servant of all.

It is this Jesus of whom we are told, “Fix your eyes on him.” There is a race to be run, and the only way we can run it faithfully is to fix our eyes on Jesus and keep our eyes on him every day and in every way.

If you fix your eyes on him you really do see him in the most surprising places. I led a class on preaching and one of the students got up and showed a video clip. It was from the Summer Olympics, the Summer Olympics held in Barcelona, Spain in 1992. That was the summer of the Dream Team, the first time the USA had professional basketball players on the Olympic Team, and so the big celebrities were Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson and a fellow who once wore number 33 for the Boston Celtics, Larry Bird. The dream team garnered its fair share of attention. But when this fellow in my preaching class got up and showed a video clip, it wasn't of the Dream Team. It was of a track and field event, the 400 meter run. And the clip didn't even show someone winning the race.

The video clip shows Derek Redmond, an athlete from the USA, lining up to run the 400 meter race. Apparently he was a favorite to win a medal, perhaps even the coveted Gold Medal. For 150 meters he is sailing along smoothly, running with the leaders. And then he pulls a hamstring. He grips his leg in pain and hobbles a few more steps. The crowd gasps. You can see the agony on the face of Derek Redmond, both from the physical pain and the deep disappointment of losing his chance at victory. But Derek Redmond continues to hobble toward the finish line. Even though he has no chance of winning, he doesn't give up on the race. He doesn't quit. You probably know what happens next, because clips of this have been shown over and over again. An older man hops over a small barrier onto the track and runs toward Derek Redmond. The older man is Derek Redmond's father. And for the last two hundred meters the father supports his son and encourages his son at times almost carrying his son to the finish line.

The man in our preaching class got up after the video clip and tried to continue with his sermon. He couldn't. He broke down in tears. What he wanted to say was that in so many ways that is what Jesus does for us. We break down, we run out of steam, we get hurt, our stamina fades, the road is too rough, the path too difficult, and all of the sudden we realize we are not alone. There is someone beside us. And he props us up and he strengthens us and supports us and he literally carries us. Well, the guy preaching wasn't able to say any of those things, but we all got the point.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord? Have you ever looked at the sunset, with the sky mellowing red? Seen the clouds suspended like feather? Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord? Have you ever stood at the ocean, with the white foam at your feet? Felt the endless thundering motion? Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord.

That old camp song has a third verse. The third verse comes pretty close to saying what the author of Hebrews says. For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross. It's not just that he came down to help us, to rescue us. He came down to save us. And that very hand that reached out and touched a leper was one day nailed to a cross, the cross on which Jesus suffered and died. So the third verse of that old camp song goes like this:

***Have you ever looked at the cross, with the man hanging in pain? Seen the look of love in his eyes? Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord.***

We will never know how much he came down to help us until we understand that he died on the cross for us.

Hebrews 11 recounts a veritable who's who of the faithful saints of God. Abel and Enoch and Noah. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. Joseph and Moses and Joshua and...at one point the author says, "I just don't have time to tell you all about everyone...there are just so many." As we come to chapter 12 we are told that since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let's run the race. And in running the race, the best thing we can do, the only thing we can do, is fix our eyes on Jesus. Jesus is the Lord. Jesus is our Lord.

That image of being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and of fixing our eyes on Jesus captures the final verse that old camp song. Have you seen Jesus my Lord?

***Have you ever stood in the family with the Lord there in your midst? Seen the look of love on your brother and sister? Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord.***

We stand in the family often, and the Lord is right here in our midst. He is here when we baptize and he is here when we bury. He is here when we dedicate a house to Habitat for Humanity, when we flip pancakes for Family Housing Support, and when we make a Swiss chicken dish for the Warm Shelter. He is here when we share our prayer concerns and he is here when we share our laughter and joy. He is here when our sins are confessed and he is here when the bread is broken and the cup is poured. He is here when a hug is shared and a tear is wiped. He is here as we fix our eyes on Jesus and he is here as we run the race set before us. He is here when we survey the wondrous cross and he is here when we sing the great hymn of faith on Easter morning, "Jesus Christ is risen today...Alleluia." There is a race marked out for us. Together, let us fix our eyes on Jesus and run that race with perseverance.