

# Running the ministry marathon: Look ahead and look up

March 9, 2020

In the [first article](#) in this series, I described ministry as a marathon, not unlike the Boston Marathon, and I promised four “looks,” or perspectives, that have helped me stay in the race.

The first “look” is inward—[looking in](#) spiritually and physically.

The second “look” is around—[looking around](#) relationally and maritally.

Now for the third and fourth looks.

## Look ahead

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14, NIV).

As Paul contemplated his own ministry marathon, his one great passion, his one great desire even as he approached the end of his race was just to keep on pressing on toward that glorious goal before him. Paul knew well the importance of focus in the great race of life and ministry.

Consider the story of another “marathoner” in a different long-distance competition. Florence Chadwick was an American long-distance swimmer who was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1970. Her two most famous accomplishments included swimming the English

Channel and the 21 miles from Catalina Island to Los Angeles.

Chadwick failed in her first attempt to swim the Catalina Channel on July 4, 1952. She was pulled from the water less than a mile from the shore. What discouraged her? What caused her to give up? It wasn't the shark-infested, frigid Pacific waters. It wasn't even the fatigue of her 15 hour and 55 minute swim to that point. What eventually got to Chadwick simply was the fog she encountered that day.

At a news conference afterwar, [Chadwick told a reporter](#), "Look, I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen land I know I could have made it."

The fog kept her from seeing her goal, and it felt to her like she was getting nowhere. Despite being told land was [only one mile away](#), she didn't believe it and quit.

While competing in the ministry marathon, it's easy for "the fog"—all that stuff that goes along with doing ministry—to cause us to lose sight of the ultimate goal before us.

Fellow ministry marathon runner, remember *why* you are running. Remember *what* you are running for. Remember the goal, remember the prize. You are running *with* a purpose. You are running *for* a purpose.

Remember there really is no greater calling, no greater race, than the great ministry marathon in which you are now running. Don't let whatever "fog" that currently surrounds you get you down or discouraged. Your labors for the Lord are not in vain. Just keep your eye on the prize.

"Look in," look around," "look ahead" and finally, be sure you always look one more place.

# Look up

“...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, *fixing our eyes on Jesus*, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV, author’s emphasis).

Thus far, we have explored several key dimensional looks for successfully running the ministry marathon: inwardly, horizontally, outwardly. The author of Hebrews would be quick to add a vital vertical look that really overlooks all the others.

While “looking up” certainly is not a very wise strategy for running in the physical realm, it absolutely is imperative for those running in the spiritual world of ministry.

Consider the [bumblebee](#). A bumblebee’s wings are so tiny and frail for its size that, technically, it cannot fly; all logic says it can’t, but it does. God made it to fly, and unless you put it in a glass tumbler, it will always fly wherever it needs to go. It will fly up and zig and zag and go from one wonderful destination to the next.

But if you put that bee in a glass tumbler, even one without a lid, the bee is suddenly in big trouble. If the bee cannot look up, the bee is doomed. Even without a cover or lid on the glass, the bee will not escape and will beat itself against the walls of the glass until it gives up and dies. Why? Because it failed to look up and fly upward. It can. The means of escape is there, but if it doesn’t look up it will not know which way to go.

The tumbler represents well the many adversities—marathon “walls”—ministers encounter while running in the ministry marathon. So often, just like the busy bee, we forget the way out of our “walls” is always

up. If we don't look up, we run the risk of losing all sense of direction for life and ministry.

The bee knows it can fly and that it can fly up. It has been doing it every day of its life, but surrounded by trouble, it panics and loses heart. This can happen easily to ministry marathon runners as well.

Weary ministry marathon runners, just keep looking up and fixing your eyes on Jesus. He is the great pioneer and perfecter of your faith. He will see you through.

## Finishing the race

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:5-8, NIV).

Paul wasn't content to be just a good starter in the race of his life and ministry. He was committed to becoming a fantastic finisher.

On Oct. 16, 2011, a [100-year-old man](#) completed the Toronto marathon, becoming the oldest person ever to successfully finish that long-distance running achievement. Indian-born Fauja Singh came close to quitting about 6 hours into the race but persevered and finished the 26.2-mile race in about 8 hours, 25 minutes. Singh didn't even take up running until he turned 80.

On June 12, 2011, a special celebration service was held at St. Giles Bramhope Church near Leeds, England. What was the special occasion? It was to honor the birthday of Canon John Clayton, a Church of England vicar who was still [preaching at the age of 100](#).

As a ministry marathon runner, you may not be running still at age 100, but

God's desire is that however long you run, you finish the ministry course God has set out for you.

If you have been called to the race, you have been called to be in it for the long haul. And so, you run and run and run, and you just keep on running. You fight the fight, you finish the race and you keep the faith.

How do you do it? How do you finish the race and finish it well? You do it by remembering always to take four long, hard looks at your ministry. You look in, you look around, you look ahead and, for every step of the race, you never forget just to look up.

“But those who hope in the LORD  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40:31, NIV)

Fellow runners, however long your race for the Lord may turn out to be, may you soar on wings like eagles, even if it be into your 100s. May you run, and run long and well. And as you run, may you never grow weary, may you never be faint as the Lord renews your strength every mile, every step of your great ministry marathon.

*Jim Lemons is professor of theological studies and leadership in the College of Christian Faith at Dallas Baptist University. The views expressed are those solely of the author.*