

Title: Tour de Faith

Text: I Kings 3:5-14

First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO, July 24, 2005

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Today is the day. The 92nd Tour de France is officially coming to completion across the Atlantic Ocean in Paris, France. 21 teams and over 180 riders began this incredible and grueling adventure 22 days ago. Most, but not all, will be crossing the finishing line sometime today after a grueling month competing in one of the greatest sporting events. And in what is considered an amazing feat to many, American Lance Armstrong has achieved victory for the seventh year in a row.

I must admit that prior to this sermon I was fairly ignorant about the Tour de France. Okay, not fairly – completely. I knew basically three things: 1) It is in France; 2) It involves bicycles; and 3) some guy named Lance Armstrong is really, really good. So just in case you find yourself in the same boat or you were surprised to learn that it involved bicycles, allow me to take a couple of minutes to give you a very general overview of Le Tour.

Synopsis of Le Tour or the Tour de France

The Tour de France is a long distance cycling competition for professionals held over three weeks in July in and around France. It has been held annually since 1903, only interrupted by World War I and World War II, and is now one of the world's largest sporting events. The race covers over 2,000 miles at speeds up to 70 miles an hour through variety of terrains that include both the Alps and the Pyrennes mountains. It lasts for 23 days – 21 days of cycling and 2 days of rest dispersed throughout those 23 days. (yes – 2 days of rest; 21 days of cycling.)

The Tour is made up of 21 stages that general come in two flavors: time trials and road stages. In time trials, riders compete against the clock. The objective is simple: go fast whether it is an individual time trial or a team time trial. When it is all said and done, the winner of the Tour de France is the one with the fastest time. All the times from the 21 daily stages are added together; bonuses received for various reasons are subtracted from total times and the fastest overall time wins. In the last seven years, the man with that time has belonged to Lance Armstrong.

Tour de France Champion/Legend – Lance Armstrong

This fierce Texan has been described as being slightly more intense than nuclear fusion. Armstrong has survived several bike-race crashes, including one that broke his neck. He has survived cancer throughout his body – some doctors giving him less than a 3% chance of survival. He suffered through months of chemo so aggressive he got burns on his skin – from the inside. His racing team dumped him. He nearly quit cycling but

decided instead to stay the course. And it has been since then that he has won seven consecutive Tours. All of this by the ripe age of 33.

A meticulous champion with an insatiable appetite for suffering, Armstrong ignores no details in his training. Armstrong has triumphed partly because he has made a career of the Tour de France, training in Spain for months leading up to the Tour, and making frequent trips to France to fully analyze and ride key parts of the upcoming Tour course repeatedly.

Now, no offense to Lance Armstrong or to any of the 180 individuals that tackle this grand tour. The Tour de France is an incredible feat. I've biked to Hartsburg which is just about 11 miles one way and when I arrive back to my jeep, I do a victory dance like I had just completed the over 2,000 mile race through France. So, I'm not disparaging their accomplishment in any way but I do think it is safe to say that the Tour de Faith is a much more demanding and challenging tour – hands down. The mountains are much steeper; the crashes, more brutal and the race does not end this side of heaven.

Imagine if Lance Armstrong or any other cyclist did not do consistent, intensive training throughout the year. Imagine what their race would be like if they only trained on Sundays for an hour or two and didn't touch their bikes the rest of the week. Imagine the effect these choices would have on their ability to compete in the tour.

Isn't it just as absurd to try and live a life of faith without a consistent and intimate connection with God? Isn't it just as insane for us to think an hour on a Sunday morning will be enough to fuel us spiritually for the week? Yet that is how many of us live.

Think about a time in your life when you have been physically exhausted (perhaps right now listening to this sermon.) A time when for one reason or another, hours of restful sleep have been lacking. Maybe the demands of balancing work, children, and marriage leave you with few hours for rest. Perhaps your mind and heart are weighted by thoughts and decisions that prevent sleep. Regardless of the reason, you are tired and you find yourself dragging through the motions of the day doing your best to function, to make solid decisions, to be patient with co-workers, to respond with sensitivity to your family. When you are exhausted, it is very difficult to do any one of these things. Sleep is vital; rest is a necessity to our lives. It affects everything we do and at some point, lack of sleep catches up with us. We feel chaotic, out-of-sorts, ungrounded. We make decisions and choices in a haphazard manner. Just like our bodies need sleep to function, our souls need God to function. Many of us in this place today are spiritually exhausted and our spiritual storehouse is depleted.

In our text today, Solomon knows that he has been called to an amazing task as the King of Israel. On his own tour de faith, he understands that he cannot conquer leading the nation of Israel out of his own strength. He'll forget this later. But right now, he realizes his need for a greater power source. He needs God. His request of God is not for a one-time help. Solomon isn't seeking a caffeine fix to help him get through the day. It is a request for God to help Solomon stay intimately connected with God. Solomon is

admitting that he needs to drink deeply from the well of God's wisdom in order to keep pace in the Tour de Faith. He must stay constantly hydrated with God's wisdom in order to live a life of faithfulness. *The Message* paraphrase captures it this way: "grant me a God-listening heart". A heart that listens to God. That is the key to our success in the tour de faith. Today some of us need to pull over, throw back a cold glass of Living Water and get back to the journey with a heart that is God-listening.

Succeeding in the Tour of Faith

Let's finish up by talking about a couple of things to think about that can help us in our tour of faith.

1. Stay Connected to Our Power Source

Just as Armstrong is a champion of the Tour de France, there are champions of the Tour de Faith as well. One of these champions that many believers and nonbelievers alike would name is Rev. Billy Graham. He has had a long and very public Tour de Faith and many of us have watched from the sidelines and marveled at his tour success.

His colleague, T.W. Wilson, called him "the most completely disciplined person I have ever known." The discipline started around 7 am each day when he would read five psalms and one chapter of Proverbs. He started there because, as he often said, the psalms showed him how to relate to God, while the Proverbs taught him how to relate to people. After breakfast he would pray and study more Scripture. Individuals close to Mr. Graham emphasize his spending large amounts of time connecting with his source of wisdom, cleansing and power.

There is a great story of Billy Graham's faithful prayer life as told by Larry Ross, Mr. Graham's director of media and public relations for more than 23 years. Ross told about the very first time he set up a network interview for Mr. Graham with NBC's Today Show in 1982. He went in the day before to meet with the producers and ensure everything was set. He assumed Mr. Graham would want to have a time of prayer before he went on national television so he secured a private room. After they arrived at the studio the following morning, he pulled Mr. Wilson, aside and said, "just so you know, I have a room down the hall where we can go to have a word of prayer before he goes on TV." Wilson smiled and said, "You know, Larry, Mr. Graham started praying when he got up this morning, he prayed while he was eating his breakfast, he prayed on the way over here in the car they sent for us, and he'll probably be praying all through the interview. Let's just say Mr. Graham likes to stay "prayed up" all the time." Mr Graham knows how to stay connected to his power source and he knows what can happen if you don't.

Billy Graham said once, "Unless the soul is fed and exercised daily, it becomes weak and shriveled. It remains discontented, confused, restless."

These words can describe many of us here today. We have been starving and neglecting our soul and we are suffering the effects. We are weak, discontented, confused and

restless. Soul-care, soul-nurturing should be our priority knowing that it will effect the rest of our life. When we stay connected to our Power Source, we have what we need to stay the course.

2. Stay the Course

In the Tour, challenges by cyclists in the mountains are frequently unanswered; and are where Tours are won and lose. Cyclists skilled in climbing prevail when they get to the imposing Pyrenees Mountains – gaining precious seconds as they make their ascent. Others fall behind – the mountains stealing away the precious energy that they are clinging to. Some of the great cyclists of the Tour de France have met their fate in these mountain stages.

The course can be frightening – even when mountains aren't looming on the horizon. Lance spoke of some of his fears when he said “What’s really scary is crashing. I look straight ahead, just waiting for some guy in front of me to crash. The race goes on, and you add rain or cobblestones. Last year on the cobbles I was so scared I felt like a child, just terrified.” Even the greatest competitor has to face his fears. But Lance stays the course. He presses on through the fears knowing that he has trained for moments such as these and that he has done everything he can to achieve victory. He pressed on through even greater mountains like cancer; abandonment but he still stayed the course and achieved great things.

There will be times in our Tours of Faith when we are terrified, when we see mountains on our horizon that seem impassable, when we are so exhausted that we don't think we can make it one more inch. If we are disciplined to stay connected to our Power Source, we will have the strength we need to stay the course – to make our way through our fears, over our mountains and through our moments of exhaustion. If we seek God-listening hearts and allow God to develop such hearts within us, we can stay the course and find success on our Tour de Faith.

BENEDICTION from I Thessalonians 5:23-24

“May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together – spirit, soul, and body – and keep you fit for the coming of the Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it.