

## Eyes of Pride

I knew nothing but pain. My legs burned as I strode faster. My lungs felt the fire rage inside of them as I lost control of my breathing. I closed my eyes looking for relief. I found none. My arms burned from the strain of trying to go faster, trying to finish sooner. The pulse of my heart continued to pound in my head, each beat shaking me down, trying to lower me. The doubts tried forcing me to slow, but I did not. It grabbed my heart and told me that I'm done! I did not listen. This race was no longer about me, no longer about my team or my family. I ran to prove to God that I had the strength to continue on. No one knew where I found it. This stronghold. This bedrock. The iron will in my heart that kept me going.

I raised my hand to call my team together. They responded a little slower than they had the year before, feeling the pressure of the season's expectation. This was our first race of the year as a Varsity team. But you couldn't tell. You couldn't read it in our eyes. No one showed any sign of nervousness, no one had any feelings of doubt. We found the strength we needed in each other, and we filled our weaknesses with God. We huddled together as we looked each other in the eyes. Our faces made of stone. Our eyes filling of pride. We closed in on each other wrapping our arms around each other's shoulders. This is our way to hide from the wind and feel the warmth of our unity.

"Alright boys, stay together. Run hard and run strong." I had heard my coach speak these words nearly every race of my life. I motioned for everyone to place their hands together; we all met in the center.

I whispered so only we could hear, "We run for each other guys, we run for each other." My team responded in nods towards each other. "Here we go." I began to shout the motto we had decided on months before. "NO GUTS!"

A deep, loud growl of "NO GLORY!" followed.

I quickly reminded the others, "Hug it out." We began to make our way back to the starting line, walking alongside one another, grabbing hands, pulling them in and holding it there. We truly were a family, united under the Lord. I neared the starting line following my team, but I turned immediately and started back out, loosening my legs and giving one last jump to make sure that my hips were loose and I was ready to go fast.

Hastily, I dropped into a crouch, placing one hand in front for balance. I bowed my head, covering my face with the other hand. The prayers began. I prayed for each teammate individually. I prayed for their safety. I prayed for their speed, but most of all I prayed for help. I knew I couldn't do this alone. My team knew it too; without God, we were just seven guys with a big dream. We weren't oblivious to the fact that this team's season relied on more than what the seven of us could do alone. But what we could do with Him.

I rose, feeling new power that seemed to originate from my prayers, I felt a new river of confidence flowed through my veins. I turned, continuing back to the starting line with a new bounce in my stride, I found no glitches. I felt no weakness.

The race went on like every race before, a gun followed by complete chaos as we jockeyed for positions throughout the first mile. We raced together, running three abreast. I found myself in the middle, Johnny on my left, Ben on my right. The other four followed closely behind, watching our every step as we flowed through the course. Our white uniforms glowed in the center of the lead pack. The look of confidence never left our faces as we ran down the hill on the backside of the course.

That day we were competing at our home meet, which had been set up into a two lap race. This meant we go through the starting line again at the one mile and a half. We closed in on that place now. Before the race, our team had made the agreement that we would pick up our pace here, at the beginning of the second lap. I then raised my hand, signaling the faster speed, and then felt us take off down the short hill we found ourselves on. I jumped out of the large pack of runners and searched the ground before us for the lead racer. My eyes met his back and the chase had begun.

I used the home crowd by surging through them and helping the cheers urge me to even greater speeds. I used the hills that others found painful to my advantage, pushing myself into more pain. Entering a new world of hurt, a world that enveloped me, I found myself looking for the Lord. But in this world there were no safe spots, every crevice and dip in the path filled you with suffering. No one was immune to it. And I wanted out. I prayed then that God deliver me.

The lead racer effortlessly flew past the two mile mark, gliding down the back side of the course, avoiding tree branches that hung in the way. He never once looked back at his pursuers. He trusted his speed just as I trust mine. Although I had cut his lead in half, I still felt myself trailing miles behind. I felt that I ran head on into the wind, fighting to move forward every step, while he ran with the wind at his back, floating around corners.

This lap I could make out my surroundings that had been hidden on the first lap when I ran in the middle of the pack of runners. The ground rough and unstable, pot holes lined the course. The view of the pond we now ran by truly was remarkable. I wanted to look longer, I felt the need to stop and admire this wonderful creation. But the burning in my legs reminded me of the job I had to do. Not for myself, but for my team, for my parents, for my coach, and for the one who put me here to do it. God himself.

The seemingly endless climb to the peak of the hill began to pay off as it came closer. This point ran in between a group of trees, this quickly became my favorite part of the course. The downhill slope propelled me through the tunnel of trees that shot me into the last half mile of open an open grass field on the backside of the course. The small crowd that jogged back

here grew loud when they saw the lead had been cut in half once again. The cheers rang out for me; encouragement came from parents, coaches, and teammates. They all pleaded that I make one final move. They begged me to push through the pain and overtake the leader. Their red faces on the verge of joyful tears as I obeyed and ran through the pain. I ventured through this new world of suffering, searching for a way out. And I found one, the finish line. So I ran for it.

One last hill separated us from the final stretch. One final challenge. One more test of our strength. I asked God that my strength be renewed; I prayed that my team be delivered from their pain. Just the remembrance of Him lightened my legs, filling me with new energy, new hope, and a new goal. I used the verse I had remembered from a discussion with my team the night before. "The Lord is my strength." I repeated this all the way up the final hill as I overtook the lead runner. I expected a struggle from him, one last fight back. He never gave any. "The Lord is my Strength." Speed now flowed out of me. It became a struggle to hold back, I fought to keep it in. So I decided to let it go, I unleashed. Letting all speed flow out, leaving nothing behind. I ran from my pursuers, I ran from everything that said I couldn't do it.

"Only one last corner" I told myself, "one last try." I went around the corner into the tunnel of people. I knew the finish line would be coming soon, I begged that it would show itself, but it hid from me.

"The Lord is my strength." I knew nothing but pain. My legs burned as I strode faster, my lungs felt the fire rage inside of them as I lost control of my breathing. The crowd yelled for me to push on. Did they mean that my competitor began to close in!? I slammed my eyes shut looking for relief, I found none. My arms burned from the strain of trying to go faster, trying to finish sooner. I ran to get out of this suffering world. The pulse of my heart continued to pound in my head, each beat shaking me down, trying to lower me. It tried forcing me to slow, but I did not. It grabbed my heart and told me that I'm done! It said that I had no strength to finish. "The Lord is my strength!" I screamed this in my head. Looking for the comfort in those words. "I will continue on!" This race was no longer about me, no longer about my team or my family. I now found I was proving to God himself that I had the strength to finish. No one knew where I found it. This stronghold. The iron will in my heart. But I had it, and I used it now more than ever as I tore towards the finish line. I ran towards my escape out of this world that I began to know quite well.

I never once felt the need to look back. All I had to do, all I know how to do is what I'm doing now. The finish line entered my vision and I ran for it. Blurry faces leaned over to yell for me, but I heard nothing. I felt lighter than ever, faster than I ever before. No glitches in my stride, my legs turned beautifully, as my arms swayed effortlessly. Stretching my limits farther than what I thought imaginable. There is no limit to my dreams; no one can cap what I can accomplish with God.

I blew over the finish line, letting out a gasp of air I had been holding in. I had just won, beating all competitors. My mind then raced as I turned back to see where my team was coming in. I am one out of seven of us, a small piece in a very big puzzle.

People clapped me on the back, pushing me down the chute. I wanted to stay and look for my team, but they wouldn't let me. They uttered their congratulations and I acknowledged them with a nod, still facing towards the finish line. I felt a medal be shoved into my hand; the weight of it surprised me as an enormous amount. It threw me off balance as I stumbled out of the ribbons that lined the finish line. The medals weight came from my memories. I no longer remembered the pain I felt. It all had been casted down onto this little piece of metal. It held

my troubles and my doubts.

The weight became too much for my exhausted body. I fell to one knee, clutching the medal, knowing that that was all I had to remember this by. I wanted to hold on to this prize for as long as I could. My head began to spin. My body began to cramp everywhere at once. I then felt a hand rest on my shoulder, it grabbed me underneath my arms and helped me to stand, the medal made my struggles worse. They hand that supported me calmly pulled me in, I turned to accept, only to see that the owner turned out to be Ben. Our sophomore had finished closely behind me. I looked at him while clutching the medal. I finally made the decision to toss it aside. It landed in the hands of my father who carried the weight for me. It was at that point where I felt the weight of the world be lifted off of my shoulders. I knew deep inside me that a medal I earned here is a much less greater prize than I will receive later if I follow God.

“The Lord is my Strength.”



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