

Focus

#eyesonjesus

When I was in 7th grade, one of my teachers noticed I was squinting and having trouble reading the board in her class. She told my mother, and we immediately got my eyes checked. We found out I needed glasses. I will never forget the ride home after I picked up my new glasses. I kept pointing out little details I hadn't been able to see before. Suddenly everything was so clear: individual leaves on the trees, numbers on mailboxes, everything else was suddenly so clear. Before I got glasses, I didn't even know I was missing those things. I had no idea my vision was bad. I just assumed what I was seeing was normal, and everyone else saw the world in the same, slightly blurry way. Putting on those glasses made me see things clearly. The world had crisp, bright edges; however, that didn't make getting used to wearing glasses any easier.

When you wear glasses for the first time, it takes a little while to get used to putting them on every day. Sometimes I was just more comfortable without them. Fast forward to now, almost twenty years later, my glasses are such a part of me that when I wear contacts instead, I constantly find myself trying to push an imaginary pair of glasses up my nose. Now I rely on my glasses fully. I reach for them first thing when I wake up. I never go anywhere without them. They have become part of who I am.

This month, we're going to take a close look at a message to some persecuted Christians in the book of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews told the people to keep their eyes on Jesus. That sounds easy enough, right? But what does that mean, and how do we do it? Basically, we need to rely on Jesus the way I rely on my glasses. We need to be so focused on Him that He is part of our daily routines and plans. Keeping our eyes



Vision Check

Think about your current relationship with Jesus. How would you describe that relationship?

on Jesus is a discipline, and we're going to study how and why we need to follow this advice from Hebrews.

Whenever you study the Bible, know the context of the verses you are reading. Hebrews is one of the letters included in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul wrote most of the letters, but we do not know who wrote Hebrews. We know the letter was written to a group of Jewish believers facing persecution, but we don't know exactly where they lived. Some scholars think they might have lived in Rome or Jerusalem. What we do know is the recipients of this letter were discouraged. Throughout this letter, the writer keeps reminding the people their hope and strength is found in Jesus. They need to focus on Him. This book should encourage us as believers because it reminds us that Jesus is enough to satisfy us through the difficult seasons we face. This lesson is essential for all believers, but if you learn to practice it at a young age, it will impact your spiritual life tremendously.



*"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 that God has set before us. 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. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up." Hebrews 12:1-3 (NLT)*

In Hebrews 12:1-3, the writer compares our spiritual walk with a race. He encourages us to "**run with endurance**" and get rid of the sin that "**slows us down.**" He also reminds us "a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith" surrounds us. What does all of that mean for us? I see three major takeaways:

Takeaway #1

Find encouragement and inspiration from the lives of the faithful who came before us.

What does this mean? Basically, it means current Christians and those from the past are watching and cheering us on. We learn multiple things from this: first, as Christians, we are supposed to support other Christians. There is no room for jealousy and division in the family of believers.



Vision Check

Do you support and encourage other Christians at your church or school? What could you do to show your support for a fellow believer this week?

Second, we learn that we need to be encouraged by the lives of other believers. One way we do this is by reading the Bible. It's important to remember the people in the Bible stories aren't just made-up characters. They are real people who had real relationships with God yet made real mistakes, just like you and I do. We need to know about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the other men and women who came before us. We learn from their mistakes and see from their lives that God really is who He says He is. He is faithful (**just ask** Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1-28). He is just (**ask** Deborah and Jael in Judges 4 and 5). He keeps his promises (**ask** Sarah in Genesis 12:1-2, Genesis 15:1-6, Genesis 17:15-19, Genesis 18:9-14, and Genesis 21:1-3). He loves us unconditionally, no matter how sinful our past (**ask** the woman at the well in John 4:5-42). He has a plan for our lives and sacrificed His to save us even when we were sinful and didn't return His love (**ask** Jesus in John 3:16-17).

These people whose stories made it into God's Word are the champions of the faith, and we need to learn from them! God saw it necessary to tell us their stories for a reason, so we shouldn't take that resource for granted. Trying to stumble through the Christian walk without looking to them as examples of what to do (or NOT do) is just like me trying to walk a path I've never been on without my glasses. If I did that, I would stumble and lose my way. There's no reason to try and forge a path on our own can learn from the examples of those who came before us.

Third, we learn that we need godly mentors to help us learn and grow as believers. Think about it—if you want to get better at math, you hire a tutor. If you're going to be a better softball player, you get pointers from your coach. If you want to improve your ACT or SAT score, you get expert advice and use it to study. We love going to experts to let them share their wisdom with us. YouTube videos teach us how to apply makeup or do our hair. Chefs become celebrities because we want to learn to do what they do. We ask Siri or Alexa to find information when we don't have the answers. If we do all those things to improve worldly matters, why wouldn't we go to an expert when it comes to spiritual ones?

God never meant for us to walk through this life alone. It is imperative to have a godly mentor in your life. This person should be someone you trust, who loves God and follows His will, and can help you mature in your faith. Often, people try to model their lives after a celebrity, but that's not what I'm talking about here. A mentor is a person you have a real relationship with, who knows you and wants to invest in you. Paul was a mentor to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:1-2), Elijah was a mentor to Elisha (2 Kings 2:9-11), and Elizabeth was a mentor to Mary



Vision Check

Who is a champion of the faith from the Bible you relate to the most? How does his or her story encourage you?

(Luke 1:1-52). We all need guidance from someone who has already walked the road we are traveling. They can share their wisdom with us, pray with and for us, and be a steady voice to guide us back to Jesus when the world gets dark and it's hard to see Him.



Find an older relative, teacher, or church member you trust and know lives a godly life, then pray about asking that woman to be your mentor. I highly recommend you choose a woman for this role because

there are things you might need help with that might be uncomfortable to talk about with a man. While it is also important to have godly men in your life as a young woman, this relationship works better if an older and younger woman are paired together. It may seem awkward at first, but if you are willing to invest in this relationship, you will see it can become a very sweet friendship and have a significant impact on your walk with Christ.



Vision Check

Who is a champion of the faith in your own life? What inspires or encourages you about his or her life?

The word "Shine" is written in a white, cursive script font. Above the letter "i" is a small, white, multi-pointed starburst or sunburst icon. The logo is centered within a solid red rectangular background.

Shine

Blog links:

Intentional Relationships

www.shinefb.com/2021/02/22/intentional-relationships/

5 Tips from Teens

www.shinefb.com/2020/09/14/5-tips-from-teens/

Takeaway

#2

**Get rid of sin
because it holds
you back.**

The next thing the writer of Hebrews addresses in this passage is the need to “strip off every weight that slows us down, especially...sin” (Hebrews 12:1). This is the part of the lesson where lots of those Hebrew people were probably getting pretty uncomfortable. We like to talk about sin when other people do it (which is gossip and judging others—both are sins), but we don’t want to talk about our OWN sin. Here, we’re told to get rid of the sin holding us back. You can’t get rid of something without recognizing it first.

We have to be honest with ourselves about our sin problem. We have ALL sinned (Romans 3:23), but we don’t like to admit that. When you start thinking about sin, you are probably in one of two places: either you’re sitting there thinking, “I’m a good girl. I don’t have a sin problem,” or you’re feeling pretty ashamed because you feel you’re too deep in sin to get out. Both of those thoughts are wrong.

For the Good Girl

Remember the Bible tells us pride comes before a fall (Proverbs 16:18). None of us are too good to be tempted. Even Jesus was tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11), and He is the perfect Son of God. When we start thinking we’re good and we’ve got this under control, we stop preparing for spiritual battle and become perfect targets for the devil’s attacks. Check out the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:1–12:24. David had always led his soldiers to battle, but he didn’t prepare for the battle himself and stayed home in that particular instance. By not going with his men, he opened himself up to temptation and exposed his weakness. He ended up committing adultery and even murder, all because he thought he was good and safe. He wasn’t looking out for the enemy. David didn’t even recognize his sin. It took the prophet, Nathan, confronting him for David to acknowledge his sin. Don’t let that happen to you. You have to be diligent about defending your heart and life from sin.

For the Girl Who Feels Shame

There is nothing God can’t redeem. Look at that same story of David in 2 Samuel. His sin of adultery with Bathsheba led to her becoming pregnant. To cover that up, David tried to trick her husband into coming home for the battle to be with his wife so they could pass the baby off as his. When her husband showed he was too honorable to leave his men in battle to come home and enjoy the company of his wife, David had him killed. The baby Bathsheba was pregnant with died showing there are earthly consequences for our sins. But after that, she became pregnant with a second child and delivered a boy named Solomon. God loved Solomon (2 Samuel 12:24), and he became the king. God blessed him with wisdom and wealth. God took one of David’s most sinful moments and redeemed it after David repented of his sins and asked for God’s forgiveness (2 Samuel 12:13-14). God still offers that same salvation and redemption from sin today. Just ask for it.

God doesn't want us to live as slaves to sin. He offers us forgiveness and freedom if we repent. To repent means to turn away from our sin. We have to recognize the sin in our lives, admit those sins to God, turn away from them, and ask Him for forgiveness. If we do that, He will give us salvation and peace. He can redeem us and can remove the burden of sin from us.



Vision Check

Take an honest look at your life. Do you recognize any sins holding you back?



If you have unconfessed sin in your life, stop right now and pray about it. Ask God to forgive you and redeem you. Look at the prayer David prayed in Psalm 51 after Nathan confronted him about his sin. If you

aren't sure what to pray, read those verses in prayer to God. As long as you are coming to Him with a humble heart, asking for His forgiveness, God will honor your prayer (Psalm 51:17).

Takeaway #3

Keep your eyes on Jesus because He is the perfect example and the only One who can bring victory.

The last thing the writer of Hebrews tells us in these verses is to keep our eyes on Jesus. Remember, he compared our Christian walk with running a race. If you've ever run a long-distance race, you know how great it feels when you round the last corner and see the finish line. It gives you a burst of energy to finish strong and not give up. As Christians, Jesus is our finish line. Our goal in life is to be more like Him and to share His gospel with others. Our goal in death is to spend eternity in Heaven, worshiping Him. He is our goal. We need to keep our eyes on

Him so we don't get distracted or discouraged.

It sounds pretty easy to keep your eyes on Jesus, but what does that look like in our daily lives? After all, Jesus is no longer a flesh and blood man walking on earth with us. How do we keep our eyes on Him?

The first thing we need to do is spend time with Him. This means we should spend time EVERY day in prayer and God's Word. I know that's not ground-breaking advice. (Every preacher in the world has been saying that forever.) But it is true. If we are going to grow and mature in our faith, we need to practice that faith daily. You wouldn't expect to become better at a sport or talent if you never practiced, so why would you expect God to grow your faith if you never put in the work to practice it?



Vision Check

Do you currently have a daily prayer time or Bible study time? If you do, what does that time look like?



If you don't already have a daily prayer or Bible study time, how can you implement them in your life? Make a plan NOW and write it on your calendar and your to-do list.

Make it a priority to meet with God every day this month, and see how much your faith grows from daily time spent with God.

Another way to keep your eyes on Jesus is to memorize Scripture. If you read the story of Jesus being tempted in Matthew 4:1-11, you will see that even the devil knows God's Word. He will twist it and try to confuse us by telling us half-truths that sound good. He even did that to Jesus! But when Jesus was being tempted, He knew the full truth from God's Word. He battled the devil by reciting Scriptures to him. The devil is our enemy, and he is smart. He knows how to distract and drag us down. If we are going to defeat him, we have to be prepared. If we know what God's Word says, we can respond to his lies with God's truths, just like Jesus did.



Find four Bible verses that encourage or inspire you, and commit to memorizing one each week for the rest of this month.

Write those verses down in the space below. (If you aren't sure what to memorize, here are

some of my favorites: Jeremiah 29:11, John 3:16-17, 2 Corinthians 4:18, 2 Timothy 4:18, Philippians 4:8.)



Vision Check

Have you spent any time memorizing God's Word so you can use it to defend yourself from temptation?

Our theme for this year is 20/20 Vision. When I think about having perfect vision, I think about things coming into focus and seeing clearly, just like when I first put on my glasses in 7th grade. I have embraced the word FOCUS as my word for 2021—a word to guide me as I spend time with God. I hope you will join me this year as we focus on Jesus and learn more about Him.

F – Fix your eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3)

O – Obey God’s Word (Luke 11:28)

C – Confess Your Sins and Repent (1 John 1:9)

U – Use your talents to honor God (1 Corinthians 10:31 and 1 Peter 4:10-11)

S – Seek your purpose and live it out (Jeremiah 1:5, Romans 8:28, and Ephesians 2:10)



I want to leave you with one last thought for this month: How would your life change if you put on “Jesus glasses” and saw the world through a filter of Jesus? Would it change the way you interact with others? Would you be kinder, more obedient, or more truthful? Would it change the way you talk? The way you dress? The places you go? The people you hang out with? The things you look at or post on social media?

Keeping your eyes on Jesus and seeing the world through His eyes changes everything. I challenge you to make Jesus your focus this month. Look at the world through a filter of His love. Put in the work to spend time with Him each day.

About the Writer: Christina Wallace lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, with her husband, Jeff, and their two children. They attend Sulphur Springs Free Will Baptist Church, where Christina has been involved with various youth ministries over the years. She teaches high school English and spends her free time reading, cooking, and playing with her kids. You can find her on Instagram @christinahwallace.