

Faith with Focus



All Scripture quotes are taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

Faith with Focus

by Brian Johnston

1. One thing I know

It's always impressive to see the degree of focus competing athletes have. Whether it's Jonathan Edwards in the triple jump, Fredericks going for gold in the 200 metres or Cafu steering his Brazilian side to triumph in the World Cup final, we can read the same facial expressions that signal complete focus on the job in hand.

I also get that same impression when I read about some people in the Bible. I get the feeling that they, too, had a real focus in their lives. Let me introduce you to the first of the ones I've selected. We find him in John's Gospel chapter 9. He's a man who started life with a disadvantage: he was born blind. But with his personal experience of going from minus to plus, he became an inspiring example of a very focused witness when he later testified to having experienced the power of Jesus Christ at first-hand.

The Gospel writer, John, takes up the story:

'Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth ...

He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" ...

So he went and washed, and came back seeing. Therefore the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged?" Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him." He said, "I am he." Therefore they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?" He answered and said, "A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and I received sight." ...

... they again called the man who was blind, and said to him, "Give God the glory! We know that this Man is a sinner." He answered and said, "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see." Then they said to him again, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" He answered them, "I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?" Then they reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. "We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from." The man answered

and said to them, "Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! "Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing." They answered and said to him, "You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?" And they cast him out. Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" He answered and said, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" And Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you." Then he said, "Lord, I believe!" And he worshiped Him.' (John 9:1-38)

This unnamed disciple is an inspiration to us all. I'm sure there

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are times when we all struggle to witness. Some might think, "I don't know enough. If I were to speak up and declare my faith in Jesus, someone might ask me a question - and I probably wouldn't know how to answer it." Well, think about this. The man we've been hearing about was a brand-new disciple. His knowledge of Jesus was virtually non-existent. But this incident - with his witness - is included in our Bibles as an example of effective witnessing for Jesus Christ!

This man who had been born blind was someone who could testify to God's amazing grace in his life - the same as in John Newton's famous hymn,

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.*

That sums up the testimony of this man in John chapter 9 in a physical, as well as spiritual, sense. Yet when the religious leaders came calling, it seems he felt he couldn't cope with their theological arguments, as they interrogated him about his encounter with Jesus. What he realized, however, and used to good effect, was the fact that people can't argue successfully against a real personal experience. After all, we ought to know what's happened to

ourselves better than anyone else does. And so it was with this man. He didn't even know the very basics about Jesus, but his answer to the sceptics was, *"One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see."*

This was something he really was sure about. He had known this life-changing experience, so it became the focus of his witness. This was his 'one thing': 'one thing I know'. It's the kind of powerful testimony from experience that even the newest child of God can give. As believers, we've all got a story to tell: an experience of going from minus to plus - one which the drawing power of God can use to convince others. We can share with others how our life has changed: how God's grace has replaced our guilt; and how forgiveness has replaced failure and fear.

And we all have a responsibility to witness; each in our own way. One of the first ever Christian disciples was Andrew. It was he who

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brought his brother, Peter, to Jesus. Then, it was Andrew again who introduced the lad with the five loaves and two fish to Jesus on the day Jesus used them to feed more than five thousand people in the desert. If we can introduce a gospel leaflet into a friendly conversation; or invite a contact to a church service where God's Word will be preached, then we've done a service for God. After all, it's God's Spirit through God's Word, the Bible, that brings about conviction. Our job is just to introduce people to God's Word in a relevant way.

Andrew's brother, Peter, was a quite different character to Andrew. Peter was up-front and direct. Sometimes it's appropriate to be a bit provocative, to take a somewhat confrontational approach. But you may feel you're not suited for that - being more at home with the approach where you first build up a relationship of trust and respect in ordinary everyday things. That relationship, when built, can act like a bridge to drive home the Gospel in due course.

The apostle Paul loved to reason and persuade - debating with worldly-wise philosophers at Athens - in that great university centre of learning. When he was there he quoted the literature of their own culture, but at other times, when engaging devout

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Jews in debate, he drew on the Scriptures in which they were steeped.

It was altogether different with Dorcas. She was skilled with her hands. She let her hands do the talking. The good works she did for others were an eloquent testimony. Long ago, someone said, "Preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words." You may think that's going a bit far, but I hope you get the point.

Matthew, again one of the first twelve disciples, also seemed to have a quiet way with him. He's recorded in the Bible as saying little or nothing, but he was ready to open his house to colleagues so that they might come for a meal there with Jesus.

There are lots of different ways to witness. It's not your style, but your focus, that counts. When we are in conversation with non-Christians about spiritual matters, let's be sure to stick to the one, main point: our personal conviction about the person of Jesus Christ. When did we last share with someone the 'one thing we know' that could make an eternal difference in their lives?

2. One thing I need

We're talking about 'focus' - about having a focus in our lives. The kind of focus top athletes have. They could never get to the top if they didn't focus on improving their 'personal best'. To have a focus like that demands that we set priorities, and give major time to the things that really matter most to achieving our goal.

The same thing applies if our goal is a spiritual one rather than a physical one. A spiritual goal may be improving our relationship with the Lord. It will demand time for us to get to know him better. Other legitimate things in life may have to be sacrificed, or at least soft-pedalled.

Having said that, it's hard to get the balance, isn't it, amid the pressures of studies, child-rearing, business, and an eagerness to be up and doing for the Lord? Those kinds of considerations set the scene for introducing someone we meet in Luke's Gospel, chapter 10: We'll let Luke take up the story, as he follows Jesus' progress towards Jerusalem and the cross:

'Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her

house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."' (Luke 10:38-42)

Very often those who refer to this story are quite hard on Martha. But I can sympathize a lot with her. She certainly wasn't someone who always got it wrong. John records in his Gospel (chapter 12) on another occasion that 'Martha served'. That time there was no rebuke, for, of course, the Lord does want our service too. In fact, even in Luke's story, I think we've every reason to believe that Martha started well. We read that *'Martha was distracted with much serving'*. The use of the word 'distracted' by Luke seems to imply that Martha had started out with her focus on Jesus himself. What's more: it says she had a *'sister called Mary, who also sat at*

Jesus' feet and heard his word.' At least one way of reading that is to understand that Martha also had the habit of sitting and listening to Jesus.

So, on this occasion, Martha has been distracted by the fact that she had so many other things to do. Can you relate to that? I certainly can. How many things are on your 'to do' list for today? Someone else has described what's going on in situations like this one Martha was in as 'the tyranny of the to do list'. It's that list of things demanding our urgent attention as the day stretches before us.

Yet isn't it so often when we've soft-pedalled on our quiet time that we, like Martha, become *'troubled about many things'*? These words describe a state of inner turmoil: it's when we're in such a condition of inner agitation that we know the difference between a door being shut and a door being shut too loudly.

If we're wise, we'll recognize our own symptoms of overload, and how we tend to behave under stress. In a state like this, one thing quickly leads to another, and on to a demanding spirit. *"Lord ... tell her to help me,"* Martha said. When tired and stressed, it's all too easy for us to become critical of others around us.

But Martha did, at least, take her

complaint to the Lord. And from the Lord that day she learnt there was 'one thing' she needed above and before everything else in her life. That 'one thing' was time in the Master's presence.

We agree wholeheartedly, of course. We nod and say, "That's right," but how can we actually achieve it, with all the noise and pace of modern life around us? Surely, the Lord's words, as always, contain the answer. He said: *"Mary has chosen the good part."* With these words, the Lord seems to be indicating that Mary had made a deliberate lifestyle choice.

More and more often, it seems, we're being advised of a need to review our lifestyle. A patient presents a list of symptoms to her GP - only to be told that many of them could well be stress-related and so the conversation shifts to analysing her lifestyle: with questions about how much is packed into a day, into a week, into a month. Establishments

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known as 'Health Farms' have become fashionable and offer clients a 'lifestyle makeover'.

At some time, Mary had presumably had a lifestyle makeover. As a matter of deliberate choice, she'd '*chosen the good part.*' That investment in 'the good part', for which the Lord commended her in Luke 10, led to the Lord again commending her for the actual service (the 'good work') that flowed from it in Matthew 26:

'When Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor." But when Jesus was aware of it, He said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on My

body, she did it for My burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.'" (Matthew 26:6-10)

By the way, this is the time when John, in his version of events (ch.12), tells us that Martha was also serving the Lord acceptably. Yet differing lifestyle choices were still revealed that day, too. Once again, Mary was at the receiving end of the critical comments of her fellow-disciples. For, as Mary lavished the expensive fragrance on Jesus, other disciples grumbled about the monetary value that had been wasted, as they perceived it. It was as if they couldn't see beyond material things. But what's the net worth of the things we hoard for ourselves? On the other hand, can there be any loss involved in dedicating whatever is valuable to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ? There's nothing more valuable than our time.

You've got to admire the focus that Mary had. Her focus was on the Lord. She was in tune with his wishes. You and I may know contemporary Christians like that, too: men and women who are outstanding for the focus they maintain on their relationship with the Lord himself, often in the midst of busy lives of service.

There's no way this would be unwelcome attention! For the Lord himself invites us to have this focus on himself. We're given a picture of him in our Bibles standing at the door of hearts, knocking:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20)

That's a very realistic picture for us, too, whenever our crowded lives threaten to leave him on the outside. Sometimes we may keep him knocking while a whole host of other things occupies our attention. Still the promise the Lord left for his disciples almost two thousand years ago remains for us to make our own today:

"If anyone loves Me, [Jesus said] he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him." (John 14:23)

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I'm reminded of the story of an old professor who was very much at home with the Lord in his life - and the Lord at home with him. Two of his young students wanted to find out what their old professor did of an evening. So one day they sneaked into his study and hid and waited there. After his meal the old professor retired to his study, unaware, of course, that he was being observed by his students hiding in the room. The students watched as the old man sat down at his desk and got his Bible out along with his study books. At the end of the evening, they watched as the old man bowed his head in his hands and was heard to say, "Lord, there's nothing between."

He'd evidently allowed God's Word to search his heart and, unaware of any particular sin remaining on his conscience that day, he'd said, "Lord, there's nothing between." Nothing between. You can't get closer than that, can you? That's intimacy; intimacy with the Lord, by practising his presence. Notice how the old man did it. He read and studied his Bible, applied what he'd read to his life and considered his ways, turning it all into communion.

Let's try to put into practice this lifestyle priority of getting the Lord in close focus in our lives of service.

3. One thing I

Single-mindedness is a quality possessed by most, if not all, great performers. If they weren't single-minded, they would never have put in all the hours of preparation, training and rehearsal. Success isn't usually achieved lightly or easily. Paavo Nurmi, the Finnish runner, was brought up in grinding poverty a hundred miles east of Helsinki. His father, a carpenter, died when Paavo was a boy of 12. Young Paavo had to leave school and run errands to support his mother and the rest of the family. He grew up a very glum and gloomy youngster. His only affordable recreation was to practise sprinting by running alongside the railway track in the black pine forest and compete with the mail train as it laboured up the slope.

These runs day after day developed in him a tremendous stamina that would also serve him well as a long distance runner. Running became his total focus and the obsession of his life. It's been said of him that there's never been such a runner. He won a total of twelve gold and silver Olympic medals. Over ten seasons he set the World Record in every

distance he ran. It was with single-minded determination that Nurmi became one of the all-time Olympic greats.

David, king of Israel, is a Bible character with a single-minded focus in his life. Perhaps to many, he's most famous for being the 'competitor' who defeated the giant Goliath in single combat. Later in life, as king of all Israel, his great successes in the battlefield paved the way for his son Solomon's reign of peace and prosperity. Yet David's heart wasn't set on winning just so that he might enjoy the reputation of being a great warrior. His mind wasn't focused on indulging himself with the spoils of victory. He wasn't someone like Alexander the Great of whom it's said he wept when he thought there was nothing left for him to conquer. David might have been a man of war - and he certainly was - but it was his passion for God that made him tick. That was the real focus

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of his life. Nowhere does that come across more clearly than in Psalm 27.

Here are David's own words:

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the strength of my life;
Of whom shall I be afraid? ...
Though an army may encamp against me,
My heart shall not fear;
Though war may rise against me,
In this I will be confident.
One thing I have desired of the LORD,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the LORD,
And to inquire in His temple.
For in the time of trouble
He shall hide me in His pavilion;
In the secret place of His tabernacle
He shall hide me;
He shall set me high upon a rock.
And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me;
Therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle;
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD.*

(Psalm 27:1-6)

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These are obviously the words of a battle-seasoned veteran. Yet the first thing David acknowledges is the source of his confidence in battle. God was his strength, he said. Just as he had experienced no fear of Goliath, neither had he any fear of opposing armies. He still remained absolutely confident that God was his salvation in every war and military campaign he went into.

Then, he really opens his heart when he says,

*'One thing I have desired of the LORD,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the LORD,
And to inquire in His temple.'*

Here's the focus, the single-minded purpose, the driving force of David's life. It was his one great longing. David didn't want to win battles in order to get a bigger castle for himself or a most luxurious life in a more splendid palace. God himself was the

longing of his life. It seems that his role as king was one that he'd willingly have swapped for the life of a priest. The temple, not the palace or castle, was his focus.

When surrounded by the threat of attack, he doesn't say, "One thing have I desired, that I may have a stronger army." No, he says, "that I may dwell in the house of the Lord." It was around the courts of God's house that the priests had their lodgings. Did David mean to say he'd have taken his lodging among them? Or, did he mean that he wished he was able - in an undistracted way, without the interruption of war - to constantly attend on the public service of God, with other faithful Israelites, according as the duty of every day required?

This was no religious mania. This was the purest spirituality. You can see that from the time when, towards the close of his life, David dedicated his wealth to the magnificent temple structure his son Solomon was to build as a house for God at Jerusalem.

'David assembled at Jerusalem all the leaders of Israel ... and said, "Hear me, ...: I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and for the footstool of our God, and had made preparations to build it. But God said to me, 'You shall not build a house for My name,

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because you have been a man of war and have shed blood.' Now He said to me, *'It is your son Solomon who shall build My house.'*" (1 Chronicles 28:1-6)

'Furthermore King David said to all the assembly: "My son Solomon, whom alone God has chosen, is young and inexperienced; and the work is great, because the temple is not for man but for the LORD God. Now for the house of my God I have prepared with all my might: ... I have set my affection on the house of my God, I have given to the house of my God ... my own special treasure of gold and silver." (1 Chronicles 29:1-3)

You'll have noticed again that same total focus of David. His all-consuming desire to dwell in the house of the Lord expresses itself again here, as David pledges first his might, then his affection and finally his own special treasure towards the new Temple his son, Solomon, was to build for God at Jerusalem. God had shown David

where it was to be built and had given him the plans for it by his Spirit. It was altogether something really precious to David.

What can we learn from that and apply in our own lives? Is the term 'house of God', which meant so much to David, something we can just use to describe any physical building today that's used as a place of worship? Sometimes we hear it used that way, but do you remember what Stephen, the first Christian martyr, said? He referred back to David, *"who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built Him a house. However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands."* (Acts 7:45-48)

The apostle Paul gives us a positive answer later in the Bible to the question, "What was God's house or temple in New Testament times?" In his first letter to the Corinthians, he addresses himself *'To the church of God which is at Corinth ... with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.'* (1 Corinthians 1:1-2)

and he asks them,

'Do you not know that you are ... temple of God and that the Spirit

of God dwells in you?' (1 Corinthians 3:16 - there's no article in the Greek, so evidently they were 'temple of God' in character).

It wasn't that he was confining this to those faithful disciples in the Church of God at Corinth, but he was extending it to all who were in Bible-based togetherness with them according to God's pattern of service. So when he comes to chapter 11, he mentions all *'the churches of God.'* (1 Corinthians 11:16)

So, we're left in no doubt that the New Testament writers like Paul had a similar focus to David. It was on the house of God in their day: a focus on a unity among Christians who, being built up together, were following the New Testament pattern of service. Such Christian disciples form God's house on earth.

So, where's our focus today? Is our affection set on God's present spiritual house? Do we seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness with all our might, or are we taken up with the things of the here and now? Is our treasure laid up on earth or in heaven?

4. One thing I do

Have you ever wondered about the kind of drive that takes someone where no human has ever been before?

In 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first two men to successfully climb Mount Everest. During an interview in 1996, in answer to a question, Hillary said that 'strong motivation is the most important factor in getting you to the top.' His statement shows us the focus of the mountaineer.

No less impressive is the sense of focus that breathes through the apostle Paul's statement given in his Bible letter to friends in Philippi. In the third chapter, Paul says, *'I ... count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if,*

by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.' (Philippians 3:8-14)

Now, perhaps, you see why Paul's statement brought to mind the idea of an uphill climb which demands focused effort.

When Paul writes here of gaining Christ he's not thinking about gaining the Saviour and salvation. Not at all! That issue was settled for him long before this. But the apostle Paul was always keen to advance in Christlike graces. Is that not our own longing: to be more like our Saviour, Jesus Christ? The version quoted from went on to express the desire of Paul to be 'found in him' (Christ). Perhaps it's not immediately clear what that means. A more expanded translation that's

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sometimes given is: to be found in Christ by observation - others observing us to be in Christ.

As believers, when we put our faith in God's Son, Jesus, God takes us and places us 'in Christ'. A life of witness should follow, in which we should try to make visible to others around us the fact that we are 'in Christ'. Or to put it another way, we make it visible by our lifestyle that we belong to Jesus.

Maybe you join with me in wishing that others were able to see more of a resemblance between us and our lovely Saviour. Thinking about the Lord Jesus, the hymn writer has written of :

*'those lovely traits
Which in all his earthly days
So beautiful we see.'*

When we hear those words sung, surely we bow our heads and say, "I'm not there yet, not by a long way." But we can take heart, because Paul goes on in verse 12

of the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians to confess that he's not arrived there either! What he does say is *'one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'*

Here Paul lays bare his heart, and shares with us the supreme focus of his life. He didn't have 101 things on a 'to do' list; just one! Paul's life was all about doing just 'one thing'. That was pressing on towards the goal of Christlikeness. He knew that God had placed his sovereign grip on his life so that he might reveal his Son in him. That's what he has in mind when he says: *'I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.'* He'd once been a misguided fanatic, opposing the will of God through his ignorance, and going in totally the wrong direction. But God had turned him round. God had laid hold of him for a purpose, and Paul was now trying to lay hold of God for the realization of

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that very same purpose: that other people might come to see the life of Jesus in the life of his follower Paul.

The life of every Christian should be a life moving forward and upward to the goal of Christ-likeness.

A year or so ago, I was with a group of young people who had come away for a weekend retreat to study the Bible. On the Saturday afternoon, some recreation time was planned into the programme. We spent it slogging up and down the mountains of Mourne in Northern Ireland. The experience brought to mind Amy Carmichael's poetry:

*Make us Thy mountaineers
We would not linger on the
lower slopes
Fill us afresh with hope, O
God of hope
That undefeated we may
climb as seeing him who is
invisible.*

*Let us die climbing. When this
Little while lies far behind and
the last defile
Is all alight. And in that light
we see
Our Leader and our Lord,
what will it be?*

I think I recall that those words 'let us die climbing' were designed to recall a tragedy on a mountain when some climbers became separated from their party by atrocious conditions. Before they disappeared from view, they were last seen heading to the top. 'Let us die climbing' is our prayer. May it be that the last view the world gets of us is of those last seen heading to the top; heading in the upward direction of Christ-likeness.

Surely, we don't want to linger on the lower slopes of spiritual mediocrity, but, if we do one thing, let it be pressing on, ever upward, in the upward call of God to the summit of Christ-likeness. In the light of glory, what a tragedy it would be if we'd lingered too long on the lower slopes of mediocre Christian living!

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