When 41 year-old Oksana Chu-so-vi-tina stepped onto the gymnastic floor tonight, she will become the oldest female gymnast to ever compete in the Olympic games. This would be her 7th Olympic games since 1992 as she competed in Barcelona, Atlanta, Sydney, Athens, Beijing, London and now Rio. She also did it while representing three different countries – the unified former Soviet Republics, Germany and her home country Uzbekistan.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Just to put things into perspective, Oksana was already competing and had won a gold medal in team competition 5 years before Simone Bile – the current US gold medalist was even born. However, like almost every Olympian, there are stories behind what we see on the television and their personal accomplishments. There is a champion within a champion.

You see….when Oksana’s son was 3 years old, he was diagnosed with a rare form of leukaemia. She was told that her son would not live if he was not received chemotheraphy immediately. However, the price of treatment was outrageously expensive and she ‘didn’t have a penny’. Taking things into her own hands, Oksana decided to raise the money the only way she knew how – through her skill and talent in gymnastics.

Despite selling their family home and being helped out by some friends, Oksana still didn’t have enough money to pay for the treatment available to her son in Germany. So she and her husband decided to move from Uzbekistan to Germany, and in exchange she would become a citizen and compete for Germany. Some may call her un-patriotic but this was a matter of life-and-death. Her son’s life is worth a whole lot more than any medals that she would win, regardless of which country she’s winning it for. She was willing to make such life-transforming sacrifice because of her son, just as what we talked about last week about those faith heroes who left their homeland to honour their higher calling from God.

To make the long story short, her now 17 year old son’s disease is now cured and her family has now moved back to Uzbekistan and she continues to do what she loves by dazzling the world in gymnastics and inspiring the next generation of gymnasts to pursue their life-long dreams.

Whether or not she steps on the podium tonight, Oksana is already a winner and has won the hearts of millions around the world. She has proven that age has nothing to do with one’s motivation to compete and to excel in whatever he or she loves to do, especially in sports. Oksana is running her race with perseverance, strong will, and determination. Even though life may deal us with bad breaks here and there, but life must go on and we must continue to strive to move forward, as Oksana and other athletes have demonstrated throughout these Olympic competitions.

In the same way, our own personal faith journey can also be seen as a lifelong marathon race that requires much perseverance. How often have we paused to look back into our own journey of faith, to see how God has rescued us and picked us up when we fell flat on our face, or by the poor decisions that we’ve made? What kind of race have we run up until now? What legacy do we want to leave behind when we are done with our competition or when our portion of the race is completed? These are all something for us to think about.

Our text this morning from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us of **how our faith plays a pivotal role in light of God’s covenant in us.** Our faith and God’s promise must go hand-in-hand. Many of the faith “heroes”, as we read earlier, were able to honour their calling and achieved what they had never imagined before. All this because of their faith and trust in God. In the same way, we must also recognize how our faith has prevailed us when we are faced with unforeseen challenges in an uphill struggle, even when we have failed to acknowledge God’s presence and have disappointed God in our lives from time to time.

It’s not about how many times we step up on the podium to receive an Olympic medal. Or in the business world, it’s not about how high one can climb on the corporate ladder, working long hours and trying to make a good impression with our bosses perhaps for our promotion opportunities. Or financially, it’s not how much we’ve accumulated in our bank or investment accounts. It’s not about how big or how pretty our house may look. None of these are relevant, we cannot take them with us, if we do not establish our faith and anchor our relationship with Christ.

As our text reminded us today, none of us are running this race alone. There are plenty of others who are running this race with us, and there are many witnesses and cheerleaders along the side line for us as well. Life is a relay race. Some of us may be called to start the race, to set an example, raise the standard, build up the momentum and then pass it on to others. Some of us may be called to anchor the relay and to bring it to the finish line. Undoubtedly some of us will stumble and fall and the whole team falls together. But that doesn’t prevent us from getting back up and continue and finish the race that we are set to run.

No one is alone….and none of us can run this race by himself or herself either. We may be running our individual portion of the relay race, however, we are also motivating and supporting one another. We must keep on pushing each other in order for us to excel to the highest level. As Proverbs 27:17 tells us that as **“*Iron sharpens iron, [and] one person sharpens the wits of another.”***

We need one another in order to sharpen our faith. No one can succeed by himself or herself or to think that he or she has all it takes or is better than the others. That’s very selfish way of thinking. As another proverb….Proverbs 1:5-7 also tells us that we must, ***“let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline****.”*

 Friends, as our text reminded us today that we are surrounded by a “**cloud of witnesses**”. They’re the ones who encourage us to get back up and continue the race towards the finish line. We may only run and finish one small portion of the entire race. We may or may not be the one who crosses the finish line with the baton, but we know that we have completed our portion of the race and have tried our very best in finishing the race that God has assigned of us to run.

I want to share with you the faith journey of another Olympian. I’m sure many of you have probably seen the movie “Chariots of Fire”? How many of you have seen it? In that movie, which was based on the true story of an Olympic champion Eric Liddell who was born in China, as a son of a Scottish missionary to China. Eric was gifted with a gift of running. He ran to represent Great Britain winning a gold and a bronze medal in the 1924 Olympic in Paris. He dedicated his “supernatural” ability to God for all of his earthly achievement and glory. When he was asked by others of how he was able to run so fast, his response was simply, **“*I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.”*** But that was not what his main purpose in life.

Eric discovered that his ultimate life calling was to be a missionary and an ambassador for God. Eric was not afraid to share his faith to others, even those who compete against him on and off the field. It became clear for Eric that his faith in God would always come first and racing becomes second. God gave him the gift of running so that he could tell his faith story to others. Most notably he even refused to compete in a few Olympic races that were scheduled on Sunday. It may cost him a few more Olympic medals but Eric believed the ultimate race that one must run in life was the course that God has already mapped out and assigned for you. Eric used his fame, his influence, and his passion for the people to preach the gospel to come to know God is. People would come not only to see him run, but to hear his sermons as well.

In one of his sermons he spoke, “*You came to see a race today. To see someone win. It happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it. I want to compare faith to running in a race. It's hard. It requires concentration of will, energy of soul. You experience elation when the winner breaks the tape - especially if you've got a bet on it. But how long does that last? You go home. Maybe your dinner's burnt. Maybe you haven't got a job. So who am I to say, "Believe, have faith," in the face of life's realities? I would like to give you something more permanent, but I can only point the way. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in [his or] her own way. And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, "Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. If with all your hearts, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me." If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race.*

**Overall,** **Eric Liddell not only demonstrated the true spirit of the Olympic, but he also demonstrated the true Spirit of God, full of integrity, humility, and grace. He was not only an Olympic champion but he was also a Faith champion as well, as some labelled him.** Eric had kept his faith and fixed his eyes upon the heavenly prize.

Those who came before us have established the standards and set the bar for us. They will be there waiting for us to cross the finish line. We must however keep running this race forward and not looking back at the starting line. In the same way, Jesus had come to set before us as the model of our faith. **We shall fix our eyes upon him at the finish line, *while we run with perseverance the race that is set before us, and look to Jesus the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.*[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Friends, what kind of race are you being called to run? Whether you are being called to run on a sprint or a marathon, only one thing we do know for sure is that Jesus has already run the race ahead of us. He has set the pace and a benchmark for us to live with. He has already conquered and eliminated any distractions that may lead us wander off course.[[3]](#footnote-3)  The Holy Spirit will continue to run alongside with us until everyone crosses the finish line. May all glory and honour be to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. http://www.unilad.co.uk/life/this-41-year-old-olympic-gymnast-keeps-competing-for-inspirational-reason/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hebrews 12:1-2* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Shelly, John C. *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 3,* p.356 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)