

training table

S T R E T C H Y O U R
S O U L

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!”

Psalms 111:10

September 1

“In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” Luke 14:33

CHRIST IS #1

Training for track is often physically and mentally grueling. I won't lie to you, I don't like pain, and many times I would run slower in practice just to make the pain bearable. Of course, not giving my all in practice was completely detrimental to my success as an athlete. But if success meant pain, I didn't want it.

It can be easy for us, as Christians to “run slow” in our race for Christ. Often we get attached to earthly possessions and have trouble letting go of the hindrances in our lives. Work, family and even entertainment become so important that our relationship with Christ is no longer a priority. When Christ is not a priority our growth as Christians is stunted. I couldn't improve on the track unless I was consistently giving my all. In the same way, we can't improve as Christians if we don't seek Jesus with all our hearts. In order to do this we have to let go of those earthly desires and priorities, however hard that may be.

Being a Christian is not always easy, but the success of meeting Jesus Christ face-to-face is worth any earthly pain you will have to endure!

-Brooke Thompson

September 2

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” Matthew 7:1

WHO SHOULD WE JUDGE?

In the world of sports, those of us who observe from the sidelines are surprisingly critical. We grow angry when our favorite team loses. We complain about how they play or how they are coached or how the team is run. We judge the way athletes live, and we almost enjoy finding their faults.

I'm not sure Jesus would approve of that. He was straightforward when He talked about judging others. He said not to do it. Being critical of others is not only damaging to them, but it also makes us harsh, cruel, and inconsiderate. When we focus on the problems of others, we seem to forget that God might be at work in that other person's life. In this passage, Jesus goes on to say “for in the same way you judge others, you will be judged.”

Are we ready to stand before God and allow him to judge us the way we judge others? Once we begin to analyze our own lives, we'll find there's not much time left for pointing out problems in other people.

—Kelly Moore

September 3

“No one remembers you when you are dead. Who praises you from the grave?” Psalm 6:5

LIVING LEGEND

It's easy to get caught up with legends. Maybe it's that professional basketball player who outscores everyone else in every game. Or what about the marathoner who breaks records every time they run? For a time, some individuals seem to be invincible and capable of overcoming any person or barrier in their way. If you're not careful, you might believe them. There's one thing they can't outshine, though—and that is God's love. No matter how superhuman a person appears, at some point their remarkable career is over. Sometimes they succumb to addictions that make them fall from grace. Other times it's just time to retire. No matter what the case, there will always be new legends emerging on the sports scene. The way that they handle themselves after the stardom is over shows their true character. We're not all superstar athletes, but we still play the game of life. How would you be remembered? Do people know your true character? Where will you be when the buzzer sounds?

—Natalie Creech

September 4

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” Hebrews 11:24-26

LOOKING AHEAD

With the NFL season ready to burst in to full gear this weekend, the experts have already chosen who they think should be playing in Tampa in February and who will be having a longer off-season. But with all this talk about who the best team is and who the best player is, are we setting these teams and players up for failure?

Often we see teams and individuals fall short of lofty expectations others place on them. Perhaps they find themselves looking ahead to the main prize rather than focusing on what is happening currently. As a result, their goals are never accomplished.

That didn't happen with Moses. Even though he was looking ahead to “his reward,” he knew how to handle the here and now. He knew that what he went through was worth it—because of the reward.

Go ahead: Look to the rewards God has for us. But don't forget to live carefully and well in the world of today.

—Ryan DeFaber

September 5

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Hebrews 13:8

FUNNY BOUNCES

Football is a unique sport, and it all starts with the shape of the ball. The unpredictability of the sport is heightened by an oddly shaped ball that can take unexpected bounces. When a football is about to hit the ground, everyone hopes for a “good roll,” but no one can guess which way that pigskin will bounce.

Our lives are in some ways similar to the way a football bounces. There are times when we have great things happen, and our life is bouncing and rolling forward. There are other times when we just seem to be maintaining. And then there are times when the bad things pile up, and life's bounces are taking us backwards. Just as we don't know which way a football is going to bounce, we cannot predict what will happen in our lives. As Christians, though, we should know that we serve a God who never changes, a God who loved us enough to give His Son for us, and a God who has a plan for each one of us “to prosper us and not to harm us, to give us hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). He's a God who promises to be there every bounce of the way.

—Darren Adams

September 6-7

“Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. Joshua 23:14

A FISHING FINALITY!

Fishing is a calculating and often temperamental sport. One must figure out exactly what the fish are striking at to be successful. One day you find out plastic worms are working; the next, it's a deep-diving jig. Other days, good 'ol crickets are what the fish are feeding on. You never know what the day will hold, and you must adapt each and every time to weather patterns, feeding patterns, water temperature, and a number of other factors.

The human race is just as fickle. Every day holds a different story and every day we experience changing emotions and outcomes. The good news is that God is stable and constant day in and day out. We don't have to figure God out every day. His Word portrays consistency and is something we can feed on each day, no matter what has changed since the last. Fishing analogies were used many times in the Bible. Remember God's consistency the next time you hit the pond, and be grateful that God's promises and love are not like those fish you are trying to catch.

—Eric Jones

September 8

“For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.”

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

PLAYING WITH EMOTION

In team sports, emotion plays a huge role in the outcome of a game. When a team is excited, passionate, enthusiastic, and determined, that team usually plays well. This “playing with emotion” mentality quickly becomes contagious. All of a sudden, players make plays they would not typically make. The team plays at a different level. This team is now difficult to defeat. In contrast, we've seen teams that played the game with little emotion, and they did not perform nearly as well.

So how about “living with emotion” as Christians? Shouldn't we be excited, passionate, “pumped up,” and determined not to let our opponent (Satan) win? Shouldn't Christianity be so contagious that the entire world should want to be a part of Jesus' team? God wants us to be “strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:9), to “go into all the world and tell others” (Matthew 28:19-20), to love others (John 13:35), and to persevere at all costs (James 1:12). That's living with emotion, and that's the Christian who is impossible to defeat (1 John 4:4, Romans 8:37-39).

—Darren Adams

September 9

“As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man.” Proverbs 27:19

God's Reflection

It's hard to have missed the “Beckham Craze” when David Beckham moved his family from England to Los Angeles, even if you don't follow soccer. Although soccer is one of the most popular sports in the world, it has never really caught on at the professional level in the United States. Bringing a charismatic Beckham to play in the States along with his famous family has brought a lot of hopes that the international popularity will begin to reflect in America.

We as Christians need to use that same “reflecting” philosophy. We want the world's love for Christianity to rise, don't we? Sometimes we're just too content to sit back and let everyone else do the work. God has given all of us talents and abilities to help bring people closer to Him. Actions, as small as just lending an ear to someone in need, can make a huge difference in that person's life. Take the initiative. You can be God's reflection to someone who doesn't recognize Him.

—Natalie Creech

September 10

“Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth).” Ephesians 5:8-9

BASEBALL'S DARK CLOUD

Baseball has been called America's pastime, and it is by far my favorite sport. But I'm sure Alexander Cartwright, the mythical "father of baseball," is turning over in his grave right now with the controversy surrounding the game regarding steroids.

The problem has been around for several years, but it grew worse when Jose Canseco came out with a book naming players and personnel who participated in the use of steroids. At first, many people distrusted him, writing it off as Canseco's attempt to stay in the spotlight. However, as investigations followed and the government got involved, the situation escalated.

Darkness always descends on those who cheat or sin. But in the middle of any darkness—whether it's baseball's problems or family difficulties you might encounter, we can shine. We are, Paul says, “light in the Lord” (Ephesians 5:8). What can you do today to avoid the darkness (v.11) and “live as children of light”? (v.8) in its midst?

—Ryan DeFaber

September 11

“Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.” Lamentations 3:22

NEW EVERY MOURNING

The University of Evansville basketball team was excited about its first season competing in Division I. The Purple Aces were packed and ready for a road trip to Nashville for a game against Middle Tennessee State. Twenty-nine people boarded the charter plane on December 13, 1977, but because of rain and fog, the plane crashed two minutes into the flight. No one survived. When a tragedy like this occurs, our human nature seems to react by asking one of two questions: 1. Where was God? 2. How could God allow this to happen? We doubt either His omnipresence or His omnipotence.

The author of Lamentations witnesses God's judgment in the form of death and destruction among His chosen people, yet he fully comprehends that God's mercy can extend beyond His wrath. Though we aren't capable of praising God with our own strength in the worst of times, the ability to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thes. 5:18) is definitely a gift from the Holy Spirit. Picture your worst-case scenario. Maybe it has already happened. Do you believe that God is there in the midst of agony and chaos? Ask Him for clarity so you might see through the sadness to witness the ever-present manifestations of His love, and revel in the newness of the morning.

—Alex Warner

September 12

“We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.” Hebrews 2:1

THE WRONG DIRECTION

In December 1999, Phoenix Suns rookie Shawn Marion recovered a jump ball against the Houston Rockets, ran to the basket, and dunked the ball—realizing halfway up that he was at the wrong basket! Have you ever been to a basketball game where one of the players shoots the ball into the wrong basket? Maybe you even did this yourself as a child. It is a common mistake—especially for young players who are excited to be in a game and shoot the ball.

In some ways, we do the same thing. We get excited and make rash decisions that go against what we know to be true. Most players, especially in the NBA, would be able to choose the right basket if they stopped to think about it, but when they feel nervous or pressured, they just go with the option closest to them. Are you making decisions in your life based on ease or convenience without taking time to think them through? Take the time to pay attention to what you have learned in God's Word. You don't want to end up giving points to the other team!

—Kelly Moore

September 13-14

“We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” 1 Thessalonians 2:8

THE FAMILY

Sports helped make our family what it is today. My father played football at Dartmouth. I recently finished playing football at Appalachian State, and my little brother played at North Carolina A&T. I also have two younger sisters. In the 2004-2005 season, Leah became the 23rd player to score 1,000 career points at North Carolina, and Christina ran track in high school. Throughout the years it has been fun growing athletically with my younger siblings. We worked out together, and we pushed, encouraged, helped and motivated each other. We are both each other’s biggest fans and biggest critics. The members of our family motivated each other to success in sports.

Similarly, it is important to have a spiritual family that pushes and motivates us in Christ and hold us accountable to our faith. Who is on your spiritual team? Does anyone push you to be all you can be for Christ? Who shares your burdens when times are tough? Fellowship with other believers is vital to strengthening your faith. Paul described a group with whom he shared his life (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Do you have that kind of spiritual family?

—Mike Metcalf, Jr.

September 15

“I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High.” Psalm 7:17

INTERACTIVE FAITH

I know we’re far from college basketball season, but one of the best interactive parts of being a basketball fan is filling out the brackets at NCAA tournament time. It doesn’t matter how much you live, eat and breathe basketball, nothing is guaranteed. I know people who pick their teams based solely on the team mascot or team colors. Half the time, it seems, they’re the ones who win. Although that’s not a major part of basketball and doesn’t really matter in the end, it’s still not fair. For a basketball fanatic to be beaten out by someone like that can sting a little.

As Christians, we can feel the same way—when we work hard to get that promotion and we’re passed over for a non-Christian who doesn’t work half as hard. We can start to wonder why God is letting a non-believer “win” over a Christian. But being a Christian doesn’t always equal getting what we want or deserve. Sometimes the important thing is that we are positive role models through our trials.

Does the most deserving team—in our estimation—always win the championship? No. In life, we must leave things in God’s hands.

—Natalie Creech

September 16

RUN ON, RUN ON!

Endurance is often the factor that separates the men from the boys—or the true athletes from the pretenders. Often, it’s not a matter of physical strength that enables a person to seemingly just keep going. It could be a simple matter of what they decided to let go of and not hold onto that’s allowing them to keep going.

In Hebrews, we are instructed to lay aside weights that easily hold us back. When we look at those who have pushed through all odds, we do not see what it took to get there. We only see the results. It’s hard to run with bricks on your shoulders, with sand in your pockets, or with your hands tied behind your back. The things that hold us back are the things that are restricting us from fully running like the wind.

We need to make a valiant effort to let go and flee those things that could hinder us from the simple command of running for God. He has already cleared the path, opened the doors, and given us favor with men. Let’s run!

—Eric Harris

September 17

"After [Jesus] had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone." Matthew 14:23

LEFT ALONE

As the wife of a professional baseball player, I have noticed an interesting pattern in my husband's behavior after a game. Every night during our drive home from the ballpark, he is completely silent. I used to take offense at this. However, one night when I was trying to make conversation during the drive home he finally told me, very gently, that he wasn't angry, upset, stressed, or troubled. He simply needed some time, silence, and space to "wind down," to process everything that had happened that night.

Likewise as Christians, sometimes we need to get away from the world, process what God is doing in our lives, to talk to Him, and listen to Him. Jesus did the same thing in Matthew 14 after being around lots of people. In fact, there are several instances in the Bible when Jesus goes away to pray and be alone. I don't take offense any more when my husband is quiet. I realize now that we all (Jesus included) need to retreat at times.

—Lindsay Adams

September 18

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Matthew 26:41

TEMPTATION

Have you ever watched an athlete and just admired their strength or agility? Top athletes put more than just hard hours in at the gym. Most competitors put in years of training to get to peak condition, often times getting 'burned out' in the process. They may seem to have everything going for them on the outside, but what about on the inside? Strength on the outside does not equal inner strength. Some of the strongest people on the planet may be spiritually weak. We are all sinners at heart, but through God's love and understanding, we can grow spiritually resilient. Athletes go to the gym to build and tone muscle. Are you looking in the right places to build and tone your spiritual strength? Look for a church that will encourage and support your quest to eliminate spiritual weakness. If you're feeling like your 'training' is at a standstill, look for a new Bible study, Sunday school class, or mentor to refresh your spiritual side. Don't get 'burned out' on your faith!

—Natalie Creech

September 19

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 15:5-6

TEAM JESUS CHRIST

The University of Florida men's basketball team won back-to-back national championships in 2006 and 2007, their amazing accomplishment resulted from an up-tempo style and pressure defense. But more important, in both championship years, the Gators had four players who averaged more than 10 points per game! That is quite a testimony to unselfish teamwork since most basketball teams are built around one or two top scorers.

Teamwork is the idea of giving up your personal goals for the advancement of the team. It is putting aside selfishness so that collectively you can be unified and succeed at the highest level. In Romans 15, Paul spoke of this unity we as Christians are to have as we follow Jesus Christ. He also stated that endurance and encouragement are the key elements to a "spirit of unity."

So, as Christians working as a team to glorify Jesus Christ, we should remember to put aside our selfish desires to better the team of Jesus Christ.

—Brian Adams

September 20-21

“Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord.” Psalm 27:6

SACRIFICING

The dictionary says *sacrifice* means “the act of giving up.” My daughter Hannah and my son Matthew are involved in two sports: figure skating and karate. My daughter goes to ice skating some days before school, and my son takes karate twice a week. We get up around 5:15 a.m. and make our way to the ice rink.

Trust me, that feels like a sacrifice. My wife, Jacqui, is running both of my children to their classes, getting home late, preparing dinner, helping with homework, and packing lunches for the next day. I feel ashamed to call what we do “a sacrifice” when I think of people in places like Sudan who hope to live another day and have a drink of clean water. Or when I think of the true sacrifice—of God sending His Son Jesus to die so we can have eternal life.

The next time we think we are sacrificing, we should think of two things: The sacrifices of those around the world who have so little, and the sacrifice of God sending His son to die. Then our issues look small.

—Robert Walker

September 22

“Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Romans 13:14

CLOTHE YOURSELF WITH CHRIST

During my college baseball years, there were many fall semesters when our team lifted weights before class (and breakfast) at 6 a.m. Getting up that early while in college did not appeal to any of us; in fact, it was grueling just to get out of bed and make it to the gym on time! But I learned an important lesson in discipline. I knew it was important to get up and work hard so that I could improve myself physically, but this involved repeatedly denying my desire for more sleep.

Our natural desires are contrary to the Spirit of God; because of our sinful nature, living for Christ requires discipline. We daily face the decision to feed our own selfish, sinful desires or rather to feed the Holy Spirit of God living within us. Paul writes in Romans 8:9, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.” It’s a continuous, difficult battle against our sinful nature, but praise God it’s also a battle that we can win with Christ-like discipline!

—Darren Adams

September 23

“He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.” Psalm 40:3

BIG LEAGUE JITTERS

It’s the World Series—the epitome of the “best” in baseball. You are a key pitcher in your team’s lineup. All eyes are on you. It’s a situation that just begs for your nerves to take control. How do you get rid of those big league jitters? If you are Orel Hershiser in the 1988 World Series, you sing hymns.

Not exactly your normal sight in a major-league stadium. That’s what calmed Hershiser down, though, singing praise to his Lord. We all have what we consider “big league jitters” now and again. What calms you down in your times of stress? Maybe you run, or read the Bible. I know when I get to the point of “What now?” I take a moment and just pray. If I’m scared, I can feel my fear melt away. If I’m worried, suddenly the problem doesn’t seem as bad. It’s just the simple fact of knowing that God is there and listening to me—no matter what I’m going through. I am not alone—and neither are you!

—Natalie Creech

September 24

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.” 1 Corinthians 9:24

ETERNAL VICTORY

Do you ever catch yourself completely caught up in sports? When it's your favorite team playing, sometimes everything around you can become invisible. While it's great to support your team, we can't forget what is important in our lives. You might be the star athlete on the track team or the baseball team's biggest fan. Yet that connection should not come before your relationship with God.

When true discouragement comes in life—real problems that go beyond how a sports team is doing, God will be there to help. He can build you up and encourage you in ways that others cannot. He is not fickle like fans who give up on their team, or coaches who berate their players.

All the hard work we put into sports should never be greater than the effort we pour into serving in God's Kingdom. After all, we are gunning for the ultimate prize. The feeling of accomplishment and excitement after your favorite team wins the biggest game of the year is nothing compared to the everlasting riches in heaven.

—Natalie Creech

September 25

“Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?” declares the LORD. “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” Isaiah 66:2

ESTEEM ENGINE

Sports provide the opportunity for glory. Single-handedly lead your team to victory, and the crowds will chant your name. Dominate your opponent, and the autograph lines will stretch for miles. Excel, and you will be called “MVP” and “All-Star.” Hockey fans hail “The Great One,” and many a boxer fell at the feet of “The Greatest.” These nicknames affirm that athletes can quickly find themselves flooded with praise. Everyone loves a winner, right?

Wrong. According to 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, God prefers losers. I am not saying He has reserved a special place in heaven for the 1991 Prairie View football team (they were in the middle of an 80-game losing streak), but He does choose to call the unwise, the non-influential, the foolish, and the weak. By giving wisdom to the foolish and strength to the weak, God obtains glory for Himself. That is the whole point of our existence! Sure, Wayne Gretzky and Muhammad Ali were fine athletes, but God has the only valid claim to greatness—He created the universe! With this proper perspective, it is easy to see that nothing we do of ourselves is that great. But when God does something great through you, give the honor and praise back to Him. Be a glory deflector!

—Alex Warner

September 26

“All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.” Proverbs 14:23

OFFSEASON WORKOUTS

Now that the MLB season is just about over, the players will have a couple of months to spend with their families and have plenty of relaxation time. But those who want to continue to stay on top of their game won't be resting long, as they will be in the gym or working out trying to get better every day. It is easy for a player to get lazy and lose focus of what he is trying to accomplish, which can lead to reduced productivity on the playing field.

Something similar can take place as Christians. If we do not work hard every day to serve God, then we'll grow out of shape spiritually—dulling our godly sensitivity. In effect, we have no off-season as Christians. Each day we must work hard to stay in fellowship with God and keep our spiritual muscles strong.

—Ryan DeFaber

September 27-28

“Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.” 1 Chronicles 16:8

THANK YOU FOR THE UPS AND DOWNS

Thanksgiving may be a month ahead and months behind, but there’s no reason to stop thanking the Lord. You hear all the athletes on television say how they thank the Lord when they win. Why not thank him when you lose? Sure, winning’s great—the adrenaline, the excitement—but it takes a real winner to thank Him when you lose. In fact, don’t even look at it as “losing.” Look at it as transforming a seemingly negative situation into a positive one. Thank the Lord that you had the opportunity to compete in something you enjoy. Thank Him for having the passion for a team—maybe you play for them or maybe you’re just the number one fan. Either way, you have a passion that you can be thankful for. Be thankful for the humbling experience that comes with losing. Soak up all that you can learn from the loss. That’s not to say that winning is bad—winning is fantastic! Just keep in mind which team you’re playing for, through the ups and downs.

—Natalie Creech

September 29

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” Proverbs 3:5

KNOWING WHO TO TRUST

If I played with the Phoenix Suns, I would always trust Shaq with the ball in the post. I know he can move around his defenders and score. But I don’t think I would trust him at the point guard position—handling the ball against pressure defense. I know what Shaq can do in the post, so I know I could trust him in that area.

In every area of our lives, we hear it said, “Trust in God.” However, it is hard to trust in God if we do not know what He can do. One way to discover that is by reading the Bible and seeing how God took care of His people. Read how He protected Joseph for His purposes. Read about Paul and the special things God did for him as he ministered. Reading God’s Word gives us confidence in God. When you know what God can and will do for you, trust and faith become simple, and blessings are soon to follow.

—Leah Metcalf

September 30

“Do everything without complaining or arguing.” Philippians 2:14

BAD CALL

“Hey, Ref! That was a bad call. Can’t you see?” “That was a foul! Blow your whistle.” “Travel? I didn’t travel. And I didn’t step out of bounds last time either.”

Have you ever heard comments like that while watching or playing a game? Maybe you’ve said or yelled something similar. While playing in a church league basketball game, I heard those exact words—and more. Every single call was argued, and both sides were growing tense. We were not setting a very good example for those watching, and we certainly were not pleasing God with our actions.

In Philippians 4, God didn’t have Paul say, “Do everything without arguing—except while playing sports because those refs can make some bad calls.” No. God says do *everything* without arguing. No exceptions.

The next time you’re watching a game or even playing in one, remember God’s command to do everything without complaining or arguing. You’ll be surprised how much better you feel and how much more fun the game will become.

—Crystal Rhodes