

Passing the Torch

June 29, 2025

I don't know if any of you were on the track team or if you like to follow track & field competitions, but both of our daughters ran thankfully ran track for just a short time in middle school. I say thankfully because as parents who supported and went to everything our 3 kids did, there is no doubt that middle school track meets rank right up there in long drawn out afternoons in the hot Florida sun spending most of the time watching nothing...

At a track meet, there is a lot of time when nothing is going on, *a lot*. And then when an event finally gets the starting gun, it is usually over in seconds. We'd go to meets and sit for hours just to cheer Lisa or Vicki on for like 30 seconds. Fortunately we were youth leaders and involved parents, so we usually knew a few of the other kids and got to cheer them on as well.

Track & field is mostly an individual sport, but a favorite event of mine was always the relay race because it comes closest to demonstrating a sense of it being a team sport. When we did relay races in P.E. I always took my role very seriously because I knew that the person ahead of me and behind me were really counting on me to do my best. Those seconds waiting for and anticipating the passing of the baton were filled with eagerness, and the moment you passed it on to the next person were filled with hope that they would finish well for the team.

Do you get the analogies to life and our faith in all that, or should I spell them out explicitly? (I have a list). Our message title today is not passing the baton though, it is passing the *torch*, kind of the same thing but not quite. Beyond the scope of a slow-moving middle school track meet, there is the global relay race before the Olympics of running the torch through many hands in many countries and places which is filled with sentiment and symbolism. Back in the 90's when the torch was run through Central Florida our family eagerly stood on the sidewalk in front of our store in Winter Park and watched it go right by in front of us with cars honking and crowds cheering the runner on...It was an exuberant scene, maybe that's why the girls later were inspired to run track (again, we're glad that didn't take).

As you might imagine, I'm highlighting all this because our scriptures today have elements of flames and passing torches. The first comes from Psalm 77, which after all the remembrances of God's mighty powers that were in our *call to worship*, it recounts part of the Exodus:

Psalm 77:14-20 You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. ¹⁵ With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. ¹⁶ The waters saw you, God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed. ¹⁷ The clouds poured down water, the heavens resounded with thunder; your arrows flashed back and forth.

¹⁸ Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked. ¹⁹ Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. ²⁰ You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

>>> In a very mighty demonstration of God's mighty power and desire to save his people, the sea was parted because Moses and Aaron answered God's call to be key parts in the persistent relay race of faith. And while it is not one of the scripture stories we have for today, that causes me to recollect the part at the end of the Exodus where Joshua is chosen to lead the people on into the Promised Land.

Last week we had a story about someone else who carried the torch quite well for the Lord, but when pressed too far, attempted to run away. That was Elijah and I trust that many of you went home and read the rest of his story in First Kings... Elijah went on to do many great things as God's prophet, and because of that holds a special place in the long line of those who so faithfully carried the torch for God.

Today we have more of the story of Elijah that has elements of fire, parting of waters, and passing the torch. In this story his faithful understudy Elisha is with him, somewhat distraught because he's been told that Elijah would be leaving him:

2 Kings 2:1-14 When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet." ⁴ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho." And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. ⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet." ⁶ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. ⁷ Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. ⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. ¹⁰ "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. ¹³ Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.

>>> That must have been a moment of profound realization for Elisha when he was able to part the water as Moses and Elijah had; he realized that the torch had been passed him, and with that torch came the power of God to do great things through him. Perhaps after crossing over the divided water, he just collapsed in emotion and with prayer at what a glorious and weighty thing this was.

Did you ever have a moment like that? When you came to the realization that God, almighty, omnipotent, full of glory and might – placed his mantle on you, little old you, to do something for him, to carry his torch in some way, for some purpose in the kingdom? We're kind of reserved in our sharing of such experiences; John Calvin wrote that it is because we are cautious not to be perceived as glorifying ourselves rather than God.

But it's *important* to share those stories so that other may be inspired, just remember to humbly say to God be the glory – you could even sing the hymn with those words. You'd be in good company saying those words, for even Jesus made it clear that he did not desire to glorify himself, but His Father who sent him. In opening words of this next scripture, think of how Elijah was carried up to heaven in that whirlwind:

Luke 9:51-62 ⁵² As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵³ And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵⁴ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁵ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" ⁵⁶ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁷ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

⁵⁸ As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁹ Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." ⁶⁰ He said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶¹ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶² Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." ⁶³ Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

>>> Did you ever feel like the brothers James and John who wanted Jesus to let them *call fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritans* who would not receive Jesus? Oh, how I wish God would let me do that sometimes, but so far He won't even let me smite anybody ☹ ... Some manuscripts of this passage indicate that James and John were making reference to the time when Elijah rained down fire in his showdown with Jezebel's priests of baal.

After Jesus' rebuke of the idea, the story goes on to show three examples of potential followers who placed conditions or limitations of following Jesus. Jesus says that such people are not torch-worthy; we might think like one of my dear seminary classmates did, that their requests had merit and that lovey-dovey-anything goes Jesus was unreasonable here. But his point was that if you want to carry the torch, you need to be all in- think of what it would be like in an important relay race if you stopped to second-guess what you were doing.

So today we have had examples of the torch being passed on to a few characters - Who are you? Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, James or John? ...One of those who had excuses not to carry the torch?

Doing great things to the glory of God is of course quite important, yet one of the simplest ways in which we might carry on the torch of faith is by how we choose to live and comport ourselves. Our final scripture has some wisdom from the Apostle Paul on what we should avoid and how we should be when carrying the torch of Christianity:

Galatians 5:19-25 **The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;**²⁰ *idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions*²¹ *and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*²³ *gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*²⁵ *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

>>> (closing words)