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Is There Any Relief From This Relentless Performance Anxiety I Feel Every Day?

Ephesians 2:1-10

Pastor Jeff Petersen

Think with me for just a minute about your own life and mentally fill in the blanks. “If I could just _____ then I’d feel good about myself.” Or, “If I could only _____ then I would really know that I’m okay.” Or, “Because I _____ or I can _____ or I am _____ or I do _____, therefore I know I’m worthwhile.” Does something come to mind? What goes in the blank for you? What are the areas in which you put pressure on yourself? What are the things that you need to do well in order to be okay?

Not sure there are any? Well, maybe a way for us to see how our values are reflected is by looking at our children. After all, they live what they see. They do what we model, and according to a June 2004 article in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, what we’re modeling is really pretty frightening.

“Parents everywhere today are realizing that stress has become a major risk for our nation’s children. Today’s adolescents and teens are overtaxed and overburdened to a degree that was once seen only in child psychiatric patients ...A poll of 724 adolescents, ages 9 to 12, ...revealed that nearly half had trouble sleeping due to stress.¹ ...The threat is so serious that some experts want to see stress-management programs taught from elementary through high school. But they also emphasize the only real solution may be for parents to make major changes in their kids’ lifestyles—and their own.

...America’s children are victims of a contemporary culture ...where adults force kids into a 24/7 lifestyle ...By the teen years, 43 percent of 13 to 14-year-olds say they feel stressed every single day; by ages 15 to 17, the number rises to 59 percent ...83 percent say they’re stressed about homework and the pressure to excel; ...54 percent feel anxiety about their appearance and weight.² ...The suicide rate among teenagers has increased 30 percent since 1970.³

...But we may not see the worst consequences until the future. Sharon Post, a family therapist, worries that today’s stressed-out kids will turn into a generation of emotionally damaged adults ...Says Post, “Their sense of worth will come from what they do rather than who they are. They won’t really know who they are.”

That article speaks primarily to concerns about kids, but it acknowledges that the real source of the issue may be us—the adults. After all, where does all that stress come from? I think that the source of much trouble and much stress and anxiety is that we feel such pressure to perform, to live up to external standards and expectations each and every day.

The family therapist, at the end of the article, said it well. She said, “Their [*and I would add “our”*] sense of worth will come from what we do rather than who we are. They won’t really know who they are.”

But who are we? What’s the answer to who we really are? Well, therein lies the problem. Turn with me to Ephesians chapter 2. Ephesians chapter 1 is an incredible chapter in the midst of an incredible letter that Paul has written to the church at Ephesus, and in chapter 1 Paul goes through a litany of descriptions of the wondrous work that Christ has done for us. But in chapter 2 he stops for a minute to take a look back, and that’s where we want to pick it up today.

Chapter 2, verse 1:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Ephesians 2:1-3, *NASB)

Last week Bryan talked about the Fall in Genesis when Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation to rebel against God and to go their own way. Bryan mentioned that sin led to death, both physical death and the even greater death of spiritual separation from God. And we saw last week that from there, everything began to unravel.

Here Paul lays out the reality of that unraveling in even greater detail. Notice from Ephesians chapter 2 in the first three verses, four tragic realities that exist because of sin. Verse 1 says people are dead, and the tragedy of physical death wreaks havoc in our lives and in our world, as people grieve and suffer the loss of ones they love every day. And the reality of the spiritually dead condition in which we live is even more devastating. Broken relationships, broken hearts, wars, envy, strife, division, immorality, deceit, shame, suffering—we could go on and on with the list of the consequences of our spiritually dead condition.

The essence of what verse 2 is saying is that people are followers of the world and unknowingly even followers of the devil himself. Day after day, people chase after the wind living for the lies that the world has propagated about how to find happiness, success, contentment and joy. The ache and the emptiness grow, the deep hole in our heart grows, and the real needs of our souls go continually unmet. This world system is actually the construct of the evil one who's been propagating a worldview that presents a warped view of God and a twisted view of life ever since he first lied to Eve in the garden back in Genesis chapter 3. The first words from his mouth were a lie about the character, about the goodness of God, and he has been lying and deceiving ever since. Jesus Himself called him the father of lies and said there is no truth in him, and when he lies, he speaks his native language.

The beginning of verse 3 brings the third thing and that's the reality that people are in bondage. You see, the tragedy is countless men and women have unknowingly fallen for the deceiver's deception and for the warped world system that he's created. Thus they live for the things this world says will satisfy, and people are utter slaves to sin and to the ruthless taskmasters of this world and its unseen deceiver. And the last part of verse 3 tells us that because of all these things, people are under wrath. Paul says that you and I were dead, followers of the world and the devil, in bondage, and children of wrath—objects of wrath—the wrath of God. Romans 5 goes so far as to say that we were enemies of God. So let's see, who are we? Dead, a follower of Satan, a slave to sin, and an object of wrath. No wonder we don't feel so good about ourselves.

You see, the reality of spiritual separation from God and its corresponding consequences leave every man, woman and child with a massive hole in our hearts and an emptiness in our souls, and we are forever on a quest to find something that will fill it. "If I could only _____ then I'd feel good about myself. If I could just _____ then I'd be okay with who I am. The things in those blanks create a relentless performance pressure that you and I face each and every day, and it can take so many forms and shapes.

In a crowd this size, I would bet that there is someone here who needs to make a lot of money. You need to have the money because that can get you the car, that can get you in the right neighborhood,

that can get you the right clothes and that can get you the right toys. And all of those things are the marks that say to you, *I am worthwhile. I am valuable. I am somebody.*

There's probably someone else here whose worth is directly related to his, or maybe even more likely, her physical appearance. There's probably a gal here who spends hours every day fretting and fussing over how she looks, and maybe she's a very attractive person who's been given a wonderful physical appearance by God, but the fear of being unattractive drives her crazy day in and day out because her worth and her value comes from how she looks on the outside.

Someone else probably needs to have the right position, status, prestige, to be viewed as a success, to be a success in the workplace, to climb the ladder, to know that they are something in the eyes of their fellow employees. Someone else probably needs to be well known or at least known by the well known. Connected with the movers and the shakers, and they find value and significance in the fact that they somehow have a connection to people who are valued in our society. Someone else probably needs to live in the right place, the right house, and it needs to be just right. Everything about it needs to look right, how it's put together and how it's clean, and when people come over that gives them a sense of value and significance. Or maybe it's the meal that's prepared and the quality of that which makes them feel they are worthwhile as an individual.

For someone else, maybe it's your children. Maybe they need to behave a certain way, look a certain way, maybe they need to get a certain kind of grades, or maybe it's how they perform on the ballfield. Maybe it's what people think of us because of our kids.

Someone else probably just needs to win. It doesn't matter the context, whether it's in the board room making the deal, where value and significance comes from being a winner in the board room, or going down to the gymnasium and being the one who wins in the gym. Maybe it's even in the kitchen in an argument with your spouse—you just need to win because that is what gives you a sense of significance in your life.

About 20 years ago, a movie came out by the name of *Chariots of Fire*. It was a story of some Olympic runners in the 1920's, primarily about a guy named Eric Liddell and the amazing journey that he was on. But there's a fascinating subplot in the movie about a guy named Harold Abrahams. Harold Abrahams was an amazing runner, but Harold Abrahams had a struggle—he had to win. It wasn't enough for Harold Abrahams that he won most of the time. He had to win *all* of the time because that's where his value came from. In one scene, Harold runs against Eric and loses. Then Harold responds to this loss in a conversation with his girlfriend.

Sybil: Harold, Harold. This is absolutely ridiculous. It's a race you've lost, not a relative. Nobody's dead. For goodness sakes, snap out of it, Harold. You're behaving like a child.

Harold: I lost.

Sybil: I know. I was there, remember, watching. It was marvelous. You were marvelous. He was more marvelous is all. On the day the best man won.

Harold: I had to look for him. It's absolutely fundamental. You never look.

Sybil: He was ahead. There was nothing you could have done. He won fair and square.

Harold: Well, that's that, Abrahams.

Sybil: Well, if you can't take a beating, perhaps it's for the best.

Harold: I don't run to take beatings. I run to win. If I can't win, I won't run.

Sybil: If you don't run, you can't win. Give me a ring when you've soaked that one up.

Harold: I just don't know what to do.

Sybil: Try growing up.

I can relate to Harold Abrahams—the unsettled soul that desperately needed to win. In fact, if I were honest with you, I would have to say the first half of my life was much like Harold Abrahams'—on a quest and a journey to achieve, to accomplish, to win in order to find some sort of sense of value and significance about who I was. I remember even as a young child, in the littlest of things—playing a game of Monopoly with my sister. I vividly remember one day when Deb and I were playing Monopoly together. We were going through the whole game, and as it started to get to a certain point it began to become pretty evident that I was not going to win. So I “accidentally” flipped the board over and the whole game was ruined and then we could never know for sure who was going to win.

I remember as a brand new newlywed husband going out with my wife to a basketball court and thinking we'd just spend a little fun time together and play a game of “horse.” After she beat me, it wasn't a fun time, as I was so frustrated and discouraged over my failed performance even in such a little thing. Like many, as a young person growing up, I went through a lot of things to try to figure out who I was—what it was that made me “me.” And like many young boys, it started with sports. I tried all kinds of different sports and finally I landed on wrestling. That was the sport for me and I was good at it, so for 10 years I became a wrestler. I remember going to tournaments and winning matches, beating other guys, winning medals, winning tournaments and getting an incredible sense of value and worth from the fact that I was a winning wrestler.

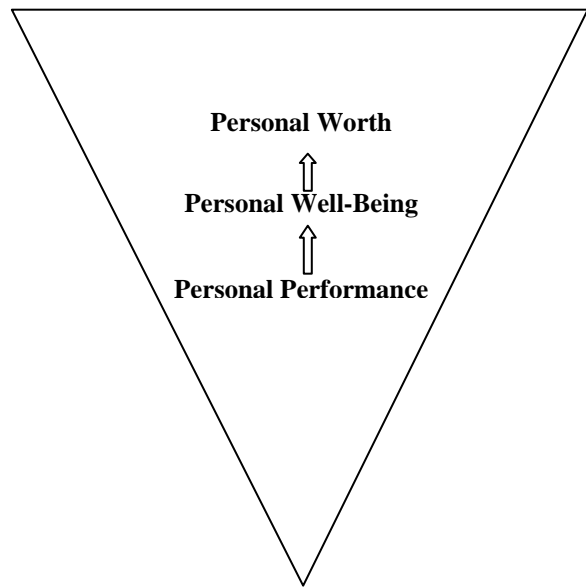
But then as I reached high school, I began to enjoy it less and it became more of a struggle. I remember going through a profound sense of time of wondering, *Well, who am I if I'm not a wrestler?* And it was at that point that I figured out that I had some aptitude for speaking and I got involved in speech and debate. I remember the joy of discovering that and then going to speech tournaments and winning tournament after tournament after tournament and thinking, *I'm a speaker—that's who I am. It's where my value and my worth come from.* There were other things—band, music, being in drama and musicals in high school and winning awards. I remember so desperately wanting to win and being so excited when I became the “Bearcat of the Week” at Scottsbluff High School. Other things, like being in positions such as the student representative on the school board, all were a part of a quest on a journey to try to do things to validate myself.

College was more of the same, but then the real issue of popularity came to the forefront—being in the right fraternity, having the right girlfriend, drinking the right thing, saying the right thing, wearing the right thing. And still the issue of position and success is what I looked to as I tried to get good grades and then offices in my fraternity and positions in other places on campus, all on an endless quest to be able to prove to myself and the world that I was worthwhile.

For me it came to a pinnacle during my junior year of college. I had gotten involved in enough things on campus that some people came up to me and said, “Jeff, you should run for student body president.” I remember being so struck by that because I'd never even aspired to being student body president—hadn't thought about it, hadn't planned for it—but I distinctly remember thinking to myself, *This is it. If I could become the number one student on this campus of 24,000 at the University of Nebraska, I could look in the mirror and know that I'm worthwhile.* So I set off on

this quest, and what I thought would satisfy turned into what I would say was probably the most miserable year of my existence. Even on the night of my election victory, there was a huge party, and I remember slipping out during the party and looking up at the stars in the sky and thinking to myself, *If it doesn't feel any better than this even in the moment of victory, then what hope is there?*

Later, I would learn an illustration that summarized my problem that I'd like to share with you. It's a picture of how the world system has turned everything upside down. You see, all of the things that should be on the top are on the bottom, and the things that are on the bottom should be on the top, so then we have to take the triangle which represents our lives and turn it upside down. In the world system the foundation is our personal performance. The world says that what you do equals who you are. Your worth is your performance plus other people's opinions. The problem is that changes all the time. It goes up and down, and you're good at some things; you're bad at some things; it's a shaky foundation. And the world says that out of your performance comes your sense of well-being.



Answer the question: How am I doing? How am I doing this week? Well, often it reflects back to how you are performing this week. And if you're performing well, then maybe it's a good week; but if you're not, it's not. You put together the moments of your performance and the weeks of your well-being, and those begin to establish the essence of your identity—who you are—and the basis of your worth. And over time, you begin to settle into, *This is who I am or who I'm not*—all based on how you perform.

You know, only one of two outcomes can result. Either you perform really well, which leads to pride. That leads to a deep-seated fear of not ever measuring up, and it leads to a deep fear of being exposed to anyone else. Or you don't perform well and you fail, which leads to a sense of shame and worthlessness and a lack of value. You see, no matter how you slice it, it is a completely unstable foundation and it's just really a miserable way to live.

That is why I'm so thankful for Ephesians 2, verse 4:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (vs. 4-6)

“But God.” In light of the context, these are perhaps the two most important and powerful, wonderful words in the history of mankind. Because what's the context? The context is verses 1-3 which began with **“And you.”** **“And you were dead.”** It is saying, “You were a follower of the world's system and its deceiver. You were a slave to sin and you were an object of wrath”—that's the context of **“And you.”** Verse 4: **“But God.”** He is rich in mercy and because of that mercy it says He has loved us with a great love. Even though we were dead, absolutely incapable of helping ourselves, He saved us by His grace and He made us alive with Christ and has given us right standing before God and a position of honor in the heavenly realms. And He did it all to show over and over again just how overwhelmingly gracious and kind and good He really is.

Those who have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord have been resurrected. We were spiritually dead, but we've been given new life. That's why Paul writes verses 1-3 in the past tense. You see, before you trusted Christ, you *were* dead, you *were* a follower of Satan's world system, you *were* in bondage, you *were* a child of wrath. But if you've trusted Christ as your Savior, you are not any of those anymore. You are a child of the King and you are deeply and dearly loved.

Verses 8 and 9 give one of the greatest statements of explanation on salvation found anywhere in Scripture. Verse 8:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (vs. 8-9)

Salvation is a gift. We did not earn it; we could not earn it. It is not by works. There is absolutely nothing you and I could do to merit forgiveness and right standing before God. There is nothing we can do to escape the dreadful descriptions of verses 1 through 3. **“But God”** in His wonderful mercy and His amazing grace did for us what we could never do. He became a man. He walked among us. He lived a sinless life, and He went to a cruel cross—not for anything that He had ever done, but to pay the very real penalty that we owe for our sin—and then He rose again to conquer death and give eternal life. And all we have to do is accept the gift—to place our faith, our trust, in Christ and Christ alone as the all-sufficient payment for our sins and as the only means by which we may be reconciled, brought back into a right relationship with God.

Jesus was the solution God foretold all the way back in Genesis 3, as Bryan shared last week. Jesus has made a way for you and me to be brought back into close fellowship with God like Adam and Eve enjoyed before the Fall, both now and for all eternity. Friends, the amazing thing to me is that it has absolutely nothing to do with our performance. Paul even goes so far as to spell it out. In verse 9 he says, “No one may boast.” I am not somehow more deserving. Bryan Clark is not somehow more deserving. You are not more deserving. None of us are deserving. But God is so good, so kind, so gracious; He has given us what we desperately need—the way to patch up that gaping hole in our soul through the gift of a right relationship with Himself.

Then He turns things completely upside down. Verse 10:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

You see, our value doesn't come from what we do. What we do should come from who we are, and we are His workmanship. Psalm 139 says that every single one of you is made by God, knit together in your mother's womb with a unique design. There never has been—there never will be—another you. And yet we realize as we've studied in Genesis that the image of God in us was tainted by sin. But here in Ephesians, God solves the problem. He washes us and He forgives us through Christ. God has recreated us in Christ as His workmanship. You are His work of art. When you trust Christ, He gives you a new life and a new nature and He begins a process of a journey of transforming you into a completely different person—one whom He can use to do amazing things that will show His glory to the world.

By the way, did you notice what Ephesians 2:10 said about what you should do? Verse 10 again:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

First of all, God has a sovereign purpose for your life. God made you and redeemed you with specific good works in mind. He has plans for you. It's a sovereign purpose. It's also a unique purpose. There's no competition. We don't need to spend our lives trying to compete with everybody else, or anybody else. The reality is we just need to walk with God and discover who He has created us to be and walk in the path of the things that He has created for us to do. There's not another person on earth for whom God has marked out the same plan. It's a sovereign purpose and a unique purpose—just for you.

You know, I mentioned that *Chariots of Fire* is primarily about a man named Eric Liddell, and Eric Liddell was wrestling with how to serve the Lord with his life. His sister was really putting the pressure on him to go immediately as a missionary to China because that's what she thought he was supposed to do, and she thought all of this running races was just a distraction and a waste of time. Finally Eric tells his sister Jennie what he thinks God wants him to do.

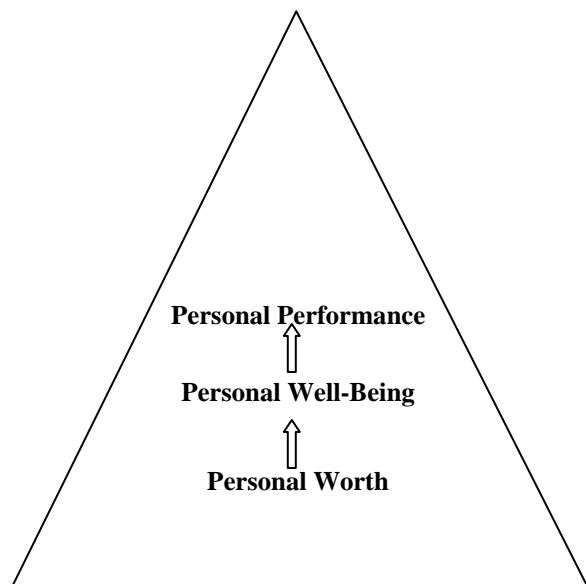
Eric: I've decided. I'm going back to China. The missionary service has accepted me.

Jennie: Oh Eric! Oh, I'm so pleased!

Eric: But I've got a lot of running to do first. Jenny, you've got to understand: I believe that God made me for a purpose—for China—but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold Him in contempt. You were right. It's not just fun. To win is to honor Him.

Like Harold Abrahams, Eric Liddell also ran. But he wasn't running to beat Abrahams, or anyone else. He was running to bring glory and pleasure to the God who had given him his amazing gift. And when we start to understand life from the perspective of Eric Liddell and that true story, then God begins to take things and turn our lives right side up. Instead of living with the broken foundation and system of the world, God begins to give us a new way and a new perspective with the solid foundation of His perspective. You see, in God's economy our worth is foundational. It's not changing. It's not fleeting. Your value is not based on what you do. Your value is based on the fact that an almighty God thought you were worth going to a cross to die for. And when He died on that cross, that expression of His love for you forever established your worth in His sight, and that's the only thing that matters.

We as people need to live out of a foundation of understanding that we are His workmanship. We are His dearly loved children if we've trusted Christ. And He has called us to live lives to bring Him glory. So then, out of that sense of worth, our well-being even gets better because as people ask how we're doing week to week, the circumstances of life change from moment to moment, but the foundation is unshakable. So we can handle the circumstances of life and the trials that we face, and out of that comes the performance, comes the good works, comes the ability to do the amazing. Not because we need to do it to show that we're something, but because we want to do it to bring glory to God.



I'll never forget the first time that I began to learn that lesson. It was when I was that student body president and I was invited to a luncheon for the governor of our state, all the members of the legislature, a bunch of important people in the state of Nebraska. As it turned out, I was seated right next to the governor, and that was cool. Even more cool was the fact that here I was—this 21 year-old kid—and the meal just before that, the governor had been at the White House at a state dinner sitting in between Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. I was sitting there as a 21 year-old as she was telling me all about this, and I was thinking, *Man, this is so cool. She's with them; I'm with her.* Then the president of the university got up and, in front of all these people, he introduced me as his boss because I was a student representative, a member of the Board of Regents. And I distinctly remember thinking to myself, *This is it. This is what life is all about. This is really what satisfies.*

But somehow, only by the grace of God, in the middle of that luncheon while the governor got up to speak, God did something in my heart, and I tell you it was like scales falling from my eyes. I began to look around the room. I began to see the other people, and suddenly it occurred to me, *This isn't it at all. In fact, many of these people are just like me, only they're 40 and 50 and 60. They're doing the same thing. They want to have some important position, primarily so they can get up in the morning, look in the mirror and say, "I'm okay, I'm worthwhile."* And from there, God began a journey that has now lasted for nearly 20 years of transforming my life and my understanding of the foundation of who I am, and what it is that I live for, and how I order my days.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't want to in any way give you the impression that I've arrived. I've got a long way to go. I still battle this regularly—this issue of living on the basis of my value being what I do. In fact, I was realizing while I prepared for this message that I was struggling with that very thing yet again. You see, the source of my problem when it comes to preaching is Bryan Clark and Mark Kremer. You see, those two guys, they get up here and they give the whole message without ever using notes. They stand up here and they “dance around.” They've got the whole thing in their head, you know, and they're just going on and on, and I think to myself, *Man, if I want to be a great preacher like them, I should do it without notes. I want people to think I'm as good as Mark and Bryan.*

The problem is I'm not as good at that as they are. I'm just more comfortable with my notes. And you know, I could try and be like Mark and Bryan and, to be honest, I thought about it this week: *I'm going to do it without notes.* Then I have to wrestle before the Lord with saying, “Who am I and where am I at?” and accepting who I am and being okay with that. I could get up here without notes, forget my message and fall off the stage, or I could stand here with my notes, and hopefully God can work through even me. So that's how I'm still growing in a process of understanding God's view of myself.

You know, the interesting thing about *Chariots of Fire* is the contrast. You see, both men ran. Both men ran like the winds. Both men ran in the Olympics. Both men even won Olympic gold. In many ways, what they did was the same. But who they were was completely different. Harold Abrahams was a sad picture of a tortured soul. Eric Liddell's life was an amazing story of joy and peace. Why? What's the difference? I believe it is absolutely because of the contrast of Ephesians 2:1-3 versus Ephesians 2:4-10.

Everywhere there are gifted, able, attractive, talented, amazing people. Every single person has been made by God on purpose for a purpose. And I have a couple of questions for you. The first question is: Have you trusted Christ and Christ alone for your salvation? Are you still stuck in the reality of Ephesians 2:1-3, or have you understood the great wonder of “**But God**” and received the

gift of His mercy and His grace—the gift of eternal life and right standing before Him based not on anything you do, but only on the work of His Son?

If you have trusted Christ, then my question for you is this: Are you using the things that He’s given you—the abilities you have and the way you’re made—are you using those things to *establish* who you are? Or are you using those *because* of who you are? Do you need something to fill in the blank in order to be okay? Or are you free because of what Christ has done for you, to know who you are and to seek to excel at being all you can be, not because you want to *become* something, but rather because by God’s great grace, you already *are* something?

Let’s conclude with a picture of the results of that contrast as we watch the reenactment of Harold Abrahams talking to his friend Aubrey just before his Olympic race, and then Eric Liddell actually running his.

Harold: That’s your secret. Contentment. I’m 24 and I’ve never known it. I’m forever in pursuit and I don’t even know what it is I’m chasing. Aubrey, old chap, I’m scared. Sam and I, we’ve labored around and bullied for this. Day in, day out. You’ve seen us, chuckled over us, I’ll be bound. Out in all weathers. Maddening. And for what? I was beaten out of sight in the 200, and tricked in the semi. Now, in one hour’s time, I’ll be out there again. I’ll raise my eyes and look down that corridor—4 feet wide with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But will I? Aubrey, I’ve known the fear of losing, but now I’m almost too frightened to win.

Eric: I believe God made me for a purpose. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure.

Heavenly Father, I pray that you would help us understand the wonder of what You have done. And God, I pray that if there is a single person who has not yet trusted in You for salvation by grace through faith, they would do so today. Just simply in the quietness of their heart say, “I trust in You and recognize that You are the way and the only way” and be brought back into a right relationship with God and turn life right side up. Jesus, for those of us who have already come to that place, help us to not live as though we haven’t. Help us to understand that You are the foundation of all that we are and to stop chasing after the wind. Help us, dear Jesus, to understand You have given us our worth and now we’re free—free from people’s opinions and free from performance, free to serve You and walk in the good works You’ve prepared us for. Lead us in these things that we would live not to become something, but because by Your grace we are something. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

¹ Research by Jean Twenge, PhD, psychology professor at San Diego State University, 2000, and 1999 poll by Geogia Witkin, PhD, director of The Stress Program at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.

² 2003 survey conducted by Liberty Mutual and Students Against Destructive Decision/Drunk Driving.

³ According to a 2001 Department of Health and Human Services report.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512

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