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### Casting a vision for a race run well 2021 Convocation address

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OUACHITA  
BAPTIST UNIVERSITY



NEWS



### **Casting a vision for a race run well 2021 Convocation address**

*By Ben R. Sells*

September 07, 2021

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at [newsbureau@obu.edu](mailto:newsbureau@obu.edu) or (870) 245-5208.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. – Each year we select a theme to help us focus on Ouachita's essential purpose. That theme is based on our university's vision, mission and value statements. This year's theme is: "Vision, Integrity, Service." Each year, my convocation remarks introduce the theme. This morning, I want to spend a few moments to offer one perspective on the idea of "vision."

My embarrassing middle school story:

It's the mid-1970s in a small Missouri town. I liked playing basketball and was pretty good, mostly because I was quick. In the offseason, the coach made the basketball players run track. I didn't like running track or the practices.

When it came time for my initial track meet, I discovered that for the first time, boys and girls would compete in the same race. When the race started, drawing on my quickness, I bolted to the front – I loved how the fans cheered for me. It was going so well.

And then, I began to falter. I started gasping for breath. One by one, all the other runners passed me. What started so gloriously with me in first place ended so painfully with me in last place. It was not my best middle school moment.

“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?”

But it does give me some insight into the Apostle Paul's thinking. Running, especially in a race, can help us learn something important about life. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul uses the image of running to help describe the Christian life.

For example, in his letter to the Galatians he wrote: “You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (Galatians 5:7, ESV).

For context, this letter is addressed to a church Paul had started in Galatia, which is present-day Turkey. The church there had gotten off to a great start, and Paul then traveled to other places. He later heard discouraging reports and responded by writing a letter, which we know as Galatians.

As I read and meditated on this verse, I found myself asking these questions: Why had they been running well? How had they faltered? What vision is compelling me forward?

If the average human life on earth is something like a mile race – four laps around a track – at age 59, I'm starting my fourth lap. My challenge is to have a vision for finishing well. You've completed about one lap, and I suggest that your challenge is to have a vision for starting well as an adult.

Why had they been running well?

Paul's letter was written to people whose lives had been transformed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They had become part of a new creation that had been started by Jesus himself. They had become part of God's fulfillment – of his divine plan.

Through faith in Jesus, these Galatians had been launched into an incredible spiritual inheritance.



"A PART OF YOUR OUACHITA EDUCATION IS BOUND UP IN OUR VISION THAT "RUNNING WELL" IN THIS LIFE IS DEEPLY CONNECTED TO BECOMING A DISCIPLE OF JESUS." -Dr. Ben R. Sells  
Ouachita president

They had become children of God. They had also been given God's Spirit to help them. Their lives were increasingly marked by loving and serving their families, neighbors and community. That's why Paul wrote they were "running well" in following Jesus.

Here at the beginning of a new academic year, it seems good to remind you that a part of your Ouachita education is bound up in our vision that "running well" in this life is deeply connected to becoming a disciple of Jesus. And we're here to help you explore and understand what it means to know and follow Jesus.

How had they faltered?

These people in Galatia had a new life as followers of Jesus. Yet they had to contend with a constant tug to practices and beliefs from before their life in Christ and to the world around them. They faced challenges from religious leaders who said they must follow certain laws or look a certain way to have a relationship with God.

It's a temptation as old as time: to trust ourselves and others more – and to trust God less.

In this true relationship with God, they had that freedom: to make choices led by God's spirit or led by self. And after running so well, they began to falter.

Paul gives them a graphic illustration – a warning of what will eventually happen to them if they don't recover. Because it's such a familiar passage, I want to read it in a more modern version to help us grasp it:

"It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on. This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom." (Galatians 5:19-22, "The Message")

I've read this passage several times and had two reoccurring thoughts. First, it's interesting that the fundamental challenges of life have not changed in 2,000 years. None of us are immune. Second, this certainly describes a dark vision of life. These words are like the flashing lights at a train crossing – saying "stop" because if we persist in misusing our freedom, we will eventually wreck our lives.

"ANOTHER PART OF THE VISION THAT DRIVES OUACHITA IS THAT YOUR EDUCATION IS BOUND TOGETHER WITH THE VISION OF A CAMPUS COMMUNITY THAT CARES FOR STUDENTS." -Dr. Ben R. Sells  
Ouachita president

Here at the beginning of a new academic year, you may be aware of some these problems nagging quietly at you or, worse, sucking you into a dark place that feels like it might overwhelm you. Another part of the vision that drives Ouachita is that your education is bound together with the vision of a campus community that cares for students.

Faculty, staff, residential life staff, trained counselors, campus ministries staff and friends are all part of that community. Ask God to help you – and reach out to someone. And keep reaching out until you make a connection.

What vision is compelling me forward?

Paul gives another illustration, an alternative that describes a better way. It's a beautiful and compelling vision of attitudes and actions to define our lives and how we live with others. Listen to them: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23, Holman Christian Standard Bible)

We like being around people who are like this. And, deep down, I think we long to be more and more like this. I do.

So often when we talk about "vision," it's about what we're going to do and get done. At Ouachita, we rightly spend time on what you're going to do on campus and after you graduate. You will do amazing things as a student and over the rest of your life.

May I also suggest that we have a vision for the kind of people we're going to be and to become over the course of this long race of life?

It's a vision for character. It's compelling to me, the way this image is compelling. It's a picture taken from my phone on the balcony of our hotel this summer in San Diego. Every day, I looked forward to the sun setting over the Pacific Ocean. Around 8:15 p.m. I stopped whatever I was doing and found myself captivated for 20 minutes by this act of God's creation.



Friends, even in a third school year marked by a pandemic, could we be captivated by a vision – to be individuals and a campus increasingly marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? To be a people who love, and are loveable?

At the beginning of a new academic year, if you find this vision for character, for the kind of person you would like to become, it's important to know it doesn't just happen.

Let's listen one more time to Paul, referencing the fruit of the spirit: "...let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original." (Galatians 5:25-26, "The Message")

Part of what it means to be at Ouachita, as we live and learn together in community, and by the help of God's spirit, is to support one another, on whatever lap we may be running in the race – fourth or first – to increasingly become the original person God intends.

If we'll endeavor to do so, it can be a great year for you and for Ouachita. Amen.