

A LIFETIME® ORIGINAL MOVIE

THE GABBY DOUGLAS STORY

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

As an aid to reflection and prayer, the following companion explores some of the most important themes raised in *The Gabby Douglas Story*. It can be used for personal study, post-movie family talks or larger discussion groups. Its aim is to help relate the moving story of Gabby Douglas to our own personal experiences as we endeavor to live more authentic Christian lives.



Lifetime.

INTRODUCTION

THE GABBY DOUGLAS STORY

The Gabby Douglas Story tells the inspiring true story of the international gymnastics phenomenon, who beat overwhelming odds to become the first African American ever to be named Individual All-Around Champion in artistic gymnastics at the Olympics.

A prodigy from a very young age, Gabby Douglas first made her mark on the world of competitive gymnastics at age eight. She went on to win numerous state championship titles in her age group throughout her early career. As she perfected her athletic performance, Gabby and her family faced economic challenges at home requiring sacrifice, patience, indomitable love for one another and trust in God. Finally, Gabby made the tough choice to leave her mother, Natalie, three siblings and grandmother in Virginia Beach, Virginia and move to Des Moines, Iowa. There, she trained with renowned coach Liang Chow to pursue her dream of Olympic glory. With the grace of God, an iron will and the tenacious love of her family, Gabby made it onto the 2012 U.S. Women's Gymnastics team and achieved her dream of going to the London Olympic Games. There, all her sacrifice and perseverance were triumphantly rewarded with Team Competition and Individual All-Around gold medals, placing Gabby and her teammates—"The Fierce Five"—among the world's all-time greatest in gymnastics.



The story of Gabby Douglas is a story about *grace*—the free gift of God's unmerited favor, help and divine life—in several senses. It's a story about:

- A family that relies on God's free gift of grace by trusting in him for salvation through Jesus and for provision in their day-to-day struggles.
- A family whose members actively choose to be vessels of God's grace to each other and those around them.
- A young woman who is graceful in the sense that she is athletically gifted and able to move with the poise, speed and coordination of a gazelle.

In many ways, Gabby Douglas' story highlights the biblical teaching about how grace comes into the world. Just as Jesus is the Word made flesh, so our faith as Christians has to be made flesh—i.e., acted upon—as well. Just as Jesus is fully God and fully man, so Paul insists, “[W]ork out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).

Gabby does exactly this: receiving the grace of her gymnastic ability from God, but also working very, very hard to perfect and polish that gift with the resources God has given her. To do this, she is not a rugged individualist, but a responsible person who also relies on her family to help her. In the end she finally comes to realize that their sacrificial love for her must be honored and answered by her own sacrificial determination to ultimately triumph. Her life serves as a parable for our sacrificial lives as disciples of Jesus. Like Gabby, we are to go from “grace to grace.”

Part of the way Gabby does this is by focus. In a very powerful scene, she sees coach Liang Chow for the first time and her focus on him becomes absolutely intense, oblivious to all else but her burning determination to become his student and go to the Olympics. This is an image of how our lives as Christians are fed according to the word of God: “Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1-2).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Gabby's family sees early on that she has real talent and encourages her to pursue her dreams. Have you ever had someone encourage you to follow your dream? Have you ever encouraged someone else to follow their dream, perhaps someone who thought that their dream was foolish and might not have pursued it? What happened?
2. Gabby is the recipient of an amazing gift of grace, ability and coordination. But she also works very hard to polish and perfect that gift. What are some of your gifts? How do you cooperate with God in order to perfect and strengthen those gifts? How do you help others discern and grow in their gifts?
3. Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matthew 6:21-23). Gabby's treasure is becoming the best athlete she can be in order to honor God and her family's sacrifice for her. She allows nothing to darken her eye that is set on that prize. Have you ever had a “pearl of great price” in your life that was of such value to you that you have not allowed anything to get in the way of gaining it?
4. Gabby's family motto is: “Today should always be better than yesterday.” This speaks of a fundamental orientation toward hope no matter what the circumstances may be. Do you know people who live in hope, no matter what? What do they do to live that out? When you find your hope challenged, how do you restore it? Read Romans 8:22-25. What does Paul say about living in hope for the ultimate gold medal of heaven?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you (Jeremiah 1:5).

See also: Ephesians 1:3-6; Romans 8:29-39.

PROVIDENCE

Christians believe in grace, not magic. Gabby's mother refuses to passively wait for her "ship to come in" but instead insists that *"God helps those who help themselves."* She teaches her children to be motivated self-starters (like herself) who seize opportunities, actively pursue their goals and make things happen. She also teaches them, by example, that love requires sacrifice and willingly makes sacrifices so that Gabby can pursue her dream. As they seek to live according to these principles of trust in God, sacrifice and initiative they find the truth of Jesus' words:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:25-26).

In short, they learn to trust in God's *providence*—his intervention, guidance and care—but also to cooperate with his providence by being sources of God's generosity to each other. And God indeed provides from unexpected sources. Against all odds, a family agrees to take Gabby in so that she can train with Liang Chow.

Gabby speaks of her dream of the Olympics as being so strong it would "eat her alive" if it didn't come true. As she trains, her eye is on three things: the two competitive trials she must pass in order to qualify for the Olympics and then the Olympics themselves. But though she always has those as her long-term goals, she does not let her mind worry about the future but instead keeps her focus on the present moment, where she is learning each step of each routine and being "rebuilt" muscle by muscle. In this too, we see an image of the Christian life in which we always bear in mind the second coming of Jesus but keep our minds, not on the future, but on allowing him to change us in the present moment by cooperating with his training and discipline through the Holy Spirit. As Gabby's cooperation with her coach bears fruit in finding that things she thought unimaginable

became routine for her, so in the Christian life we find that as we step out and try to live lives of faith, hope and love we bear fruits of the Spirit we never thought we'd see. God provides grace and we, cooperating with it, provide grace-filled fruits to others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Gabby is not only the recipient of inborn talent and abilities, she is also the recipient of a huge amount of love and provision from her mother and siblings. How many ways can you think of that people around Gabby give of themselves to help her reach her goal? How many ways have you been gifted and had your needs supplied by others in your life so that you could pursue God's will for your life? How have you been a source of material or spiritual support to others as they have sought to serve God and neighbor?
2. Gabby's first coach is discouraging and expresses surprise when she does well. Liang Chow, in contrast, demands hard things of her but also tells her he believes she can do it. Have you ever had someone in your life ask you to do something high and hard, but who also gave you the confidence to attempt it? Have you ever done that for someone else? How did it play out?
3. Have you ever known someone who had a failure of nerve due to some setback and who needed encouragement? What happened? Have you ever needed such encouragement yourself and found it? Tell that story.
4. Just as Gabby's body is rebuilt muscle by muscle by her new coach, and just as the Iowa family provides her with a new home, so Paul says of the Church that the *"whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied...makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love"* (Ephesians 4:15-16). Can you think of a time when you have seen the members of the body of Christ work together to realize a Godly goal?



SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

See also: Matthew 6:25-34; Genesis 22:1-14.



Gabby understands that her life is for a purpose: that she was put on this earth by God to do something. But she does not become prideful about that. Instead, she remains humble and says simply that she wants to learn “everything” from her coach. In this, she demonstrates child-like openness coupled with the discipline of an adult.

To attain her goal, she and her family have to let other things drop away or be reordered in priority. This is a very difficult sacrifice and Gabby fears poverty. But her mother tells her, “*Poor is when you*

run out of hope, and that’s not us.” Other times, she has to be patient and not make her gymnastics career into an idol that supersedes her duty of love to God and her family. At one point, she threatens to rebel against her mother and move to Iowa without her permission. But she repents of this temptation to sin and her mother likewise realizes that she can’t afford *not* to let her daughter go.

Similarly, when Gabby, after a bad streak, becomes tempted to abandon her career, her coach and family bring her to the realization that it would

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we are imperishable (1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

See also: Romans 8:18; Jeremiah 29:11.

actually be harder to quit than to press on. Too many sacrifices would be wasted, too many lifelong regrets would pile up, so much grace and giftedness would be thrown away that the loss would be more unbearable than simply soldiering on.

And all this culminates in her performance at the Olympics when she realizes that everything that has happened in her life has been leading to this moment when the *glory* of all that sacrifice, hard work and love she has been given are revealed in her performance. As her host says, “*Sports isn’t about winning. It’s about finding out who you really are.*”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Have you ever placed yourself in the position of complete trust as a disciple? Where, when and with what outcome?
2. How recently have you been tempted to be willful and selfish in pursuit of something you badly desired?
3. Have you ever had a moment when you have seen hard work and sacrifice pay off with glory? Relate your best personal story.





***The Gabby Douglas Story* will air on
Lifetime on February 1 at 8/7c.**



Lifetime.

Please check local TV listings for details.

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