Blessings come in all shapes and sizes, in unexpected moments—and they change our lives, sometimes they change many lives, and often they change us forever.

To be blessed is not so much about being lucky or even fortunate—although a literal translation of the word translated here as “blessed” in scripture could read “congratulations!” To be blessed is a way of being in the world that is wise to one’s place in the scheme of things. Being blessed is, in the end, about wisdom—the kind of wisdom that knows we can’t go it alone.

Dion Leonard is an endurance athlete—he doesn’t mess around with 10Ks or triathlons or just a simple, run-of-the-mill marathon. He is an ultra runner. It takes a special kind of rugged individual to do what they do.

For Dion, a 100-mile ultra was even minor league. He entered a 400KM endurance event in China—a 6-day event, some days running the equivalent of two marathons. You have 149-hour time limit to complete the 250 miles. It is described as a “single-stage, self-navigated, self-supported race” or a self-sufficiency race—that is, you are rationed food and water and have to navigate how to use it yourself during the race.

The Ultra Trail of the Gobi (UTG).... [is] based on the journey of a seventh-century Buddhist monk Xuanzang [pronounced: schwan sang] (he took several years), the route passes some truly inhospitable terrain in Gansu Province. In his records, Xuanzang describes it as a place that contains “nothing but barren sand and dry river beds”, where “when it is hot, the heat sears you like a flame; when it is cold, the wind cuts your flesh like a knife”. Based on information from someone who has checked out the course, it doesn’t sound as if much has changed in the past 1,400 years. During this race...competitors... battle with temperatures ranging from -20C to 30C, avoid underfed wild dogs and wolves and face a 3000-metre mountain thrown in for good measure.

1 “The Marathon Runner and the Stray Dog,” BBC. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0470z18
Dion, an Australian, living in Scotland, arrived in China ready to compete in these extreme conditions—one of 50 runners. Dion is there to compete, and so for the entire week he does not communicate with family or friends. He hunkers down and focuses on the race.

He wasn’t looking for support. He wasn’t looking for companionship.

And that’s when a little stray dog showed up—literally in the middle of nowhere, literally in outer-Mongolia. A little dog with short little legs and scruffy fur and a look in her eye, a little dog from the middle of the desert. She showed up and ran 25 miles her first day in the race with Dion. She would nip at his heels to get him to keep running. Sometimes she’d run out ahead of him and wait for him to catch up and then do the same thing all over again.

After about 25 miles that day Dion went into his sleeping tent and the little dog went with him like she belonged there and looked at him with eyes that changed his life. She had run that whole way with no food and no water. So, he made the decision to use some of his rationed food and water to feed her.

He named her Gobi, after the desert they were traversing together. And from there, the little blessing just kept on running—in fact, she completed the whole race with him—and pushed him to an unlikely 2nd place finish overall. Dion not only chose to feed her, at one point at the crossing of chest deep river rapids, where Gobi couldn’t do it herself, she frantically ran back and forth on the shore barking on the shore as Dion crossed. This ultra competitor actually turned back to get her and carried her through a rushing river they had to cross on the 4th day.

At the end of the race, Dion knew he couldn’t just leave her there, but it was a long way back to Scotland. Dion decided to keep her and put her into the required 6-month quarantine and headed back to Scotland.

Several weeks in he was notified that Gobi had disappeared from the quarantine. Dion flew back to China and began searching in a city of 3 million people for Gobi. After 6 days of searching with the help of social media and the post office, a family called and said they thought they had her. But pictures didn’t exactly look like her and so Dion was skeptical and demoralized. He decided to make the hour drive to the family’s house anyway. When he got there and opened the door, the little dog raced over to him and began squealing and climbing on him and barking and frantically wagging her tail. She knew it was Dion.

Gobi is now happily living in Edinburgh. She’s the star character in the New York Times best seller Finding Gobi. And Dion and Gobi just got a Hollywood movie deal.

But it’s not the New York Times best seller or the movie deal that make this a story of blessing.
Dion and Gobi gave each other to a love big and mysterious, a love that shows up in ways we would have never imagined and we can only explain as a gift.

They knew they needed each other. They saved each other from isolation, from the illusion that we can go it alone.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn, the meek, the pure in heart, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Blessed are the peacemakers, the merciful, and the persecuted.

Jesus sat down on the hill and told those who chose to follow him there about God's unlikely way of taking hardship, grief, and even persecution and turning them into healing opportunities.

The Beatitudes are not aspirational. Jesus is not doing a tutorial on how to live a successful life or how to compete in the world and win. He is describing the unlikely way that God's power works in a world prone to forgetfulness and distortion when all is going well for us.

Jesus tells the truth of blessing—it is there for those who can see it—and often we are more likely to see it when we are not sure how we're going to make it—when we've lost financial security, when someone we loved dies, when the world tells us to be harsh, but instead something stirs in us to be gentle, something allows us to give and receive mercy, to say yes to the gift of unlikely moments of grace.

The Psalmist says “taste and see” for yourself the blessings of knowing you are God's. Those who lean into God, those who know their utter dependence on God, will never be condemned.

Being blessed means being willing to give yourself to a love you can't totally understand, and you can't see how you could possibly deserve. Being blessed means being wise to the fact that you are loved, accompanied, treasured, chosen. That the desert times are not God-forsaken, they are God infused. And that God is always working in your life that way—whether you recognize it or not.

Right relationship with God is on us to accept, to embrace, to live into. We become blessed the moment we know how much we need God—how utterly dependent we are on God's love, on God's ever presence, on God's wisdom.

Life isn't a self-sufficiency race. We don't go it alone. We need the blessings that pop into our lives when we least expect it and remind us that we are not alone.
Today we remember the great cloud of witnesses—those who have gone before us and who have helped to teach us about the mysteries of God’s love. They came alongside us for a time—a blessing along the way. Unlikely messengers, every one of them, and each one a messenger still, each one a window into the blessings of belief and the life of faith if we have the eyes to see, if we are willing to taste and see.

The life of faith begins in connection and in the courage to believe that there is a love that accompanies you through life’s deserts and life’s rapids, through life’s scarcity and life’s abundance.

To be blessed is to know that about yourself—that you are always and already accompanied, cherished, attended to, loved.

Not just any love, either, but a love that will go to great lengths to encourage you to be who you were made to be in the most challenging moments of this life, a life that can be extreme in its hardships.

You and I make a choice when it comes to blessings—just like Dion did—God is right here with us—urging us on, running out ahead and waiting for us to catch up and then running out ahead and waiting for us to catch up. We make a choice to feed our faith—to use some of the energy and life and passion we’ve been rationed to feed our relationship with the one who is inviting us to be blessed.

Your blessing, my blessing, our blessing together comes alive when we say yes to the miracle of each moment—when we trust God’s promise to be here, to be right here.

This Table invites us into that blessed Communion again and again—taste and see God’s gracious provisions in your life. Taste and see Jesus’ generous way of knowing exactly what we need and going to great lengths to get it to us. Be blessed, brothers and sister, be blessed.

Thanks be to God.