

## Going Forward

Our New Testament reading is Philippians 3:12-16, where the Apostle Paul shares his desires to be like Christ, as he continues his journey toward Christ-likeness.

Follow as I read **Philippians 3:12-16**.

*<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.*

We were reminded to “Spring forward,” and so last night we moved our clocks forward one hour to get onto Daylight Savings Time. One of the most popular expressions these days is “going forward,” used to indicate progression to the next event, idea, or whatever. Our text for today is a great statement from the apostle about his resolve to go forward, fulfilling God’s purpose for his life, what God had given him in Christ and to live a life that is available to all of us.

As Paul reflected on his life, while in prison because of his faithful service for the Lord in the face of hostility, he gathered a new and greater resolve for the next and perhaps final chapter of his life. It would have been easy for him to have indulged in a “pity party,” since he was in prison unjustly, and it seemed that his faithfulness to the Lord got him nothing but trouble. But Paul shows the resolve of a great athlete, who is straining every nerve to win the contest of life, for which Christ Jesus recruited him. He, like a great athlete, lives with a sense of purpose and resolve, like an Olympic distance runner, who trains and prepares year round, and for years, in order to win. Christians, as well as athletes, must be, as was Paul, competitors with resolve to go forward to the goal.

Paul says that, like a good runner, he’s forgetting the things that are behind, and is not running backwards nor even looking over his shoulder at the other runners and the distance he has already covered. He’s not basking in his success in the race, nor is he fretting over how he could have done better to this point.

Great Methodist preacher of bygone days, Clovis Chappel, says this text shows some of Paul’s common sense. The Apostle knew how to keep his life uncluttered by using a “wastebasket.” My wastebasket is absolutely essential in keeping my life uncluttered. E-mail has helped immensely, but I still get reams of ads. We need to use a wastebasket and e-mail “delete” where we can toss a lot of emotional, mental and other clutter we have accumulated over the years.

Had Paul dwelt on his past, he would have self-destructed. When he spoke of the past he said he was an enemy of the gospel, and persecutor of the church, and the worst of sinners (Philippians 2:6; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 1:16). He would have dragged himself down in overweening guilt. But he understood God’s grace had

forgiven him completely, and removed his sin from him as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

Even to this day that Accuser, Satan, brings up to my mind shameful things I did even in my youth. All of us must seek God's gracious forgiveness for and deliverance from the accusing memories of past sins and wastefulness. In Christ we are free to move beyond the destructive acts of the past.

Even after his conversion, Paul was not sinlessly perfect. Nor did he always succeed in his ministry. But obviously Paul did not let his failures and bad experiences with others bog him down. He was opposed doggedly and bitterly by his enemies, and was undermined and falsely accused by fellow ministers.

Paul was able to leave behind, throw in the wastebasket, all these bad experiences. He never gave the root of bitterness the opportunity to grow inside him (Hebrews 12:15). Some of us here today face the danger of letting bitterness over the past rob us of a useful and joyful life in the Lord. I know I continue to fight a battle over thoughts and feelings about past injustices and injuries. Paul's ability to "forget what is behind" is something I admire and am seeking to emulate.

I recall a quote by Corrie ten Boom, who called for believers to find joy in knowing God's forgiveness and grace that releases us from guilt and the root of bitterness. She said that God has buried our sins in the deepest sea, and has placed a sign over the water that says, "No fishing!" We must leave thoughts about the past, either our sins or injustices we have experienced. Know God has buried them, and we must not go fishing for them.

Paul was one whose life was also unencumbered by his past accomplishments. He mentions some of his credentials and accomplishments (4-6), but says compared to gaining Christ these were all garbage. If he dwelt on them or relied on them they would become impediments in his running the race of faith and service. An athlete can lose her effectiveness when she revels in her achievements and attainments. Great athletes are not distracted by unnecessary regrets or even nostalgia, over either defeats or accomplishments.

God gives us spiritual blessings that meant to encourage us, but we cannot afford to live by those mountaintops. We are to keep running the race with the same sense of dependence on the Lord we had as newborn Christians. There is much that you will carry from the past. Of course, great memories can inspire. Worship services and mountaintop experiences can give a lifetime encouragement. Sermons and Bible studies heard in the past can come to mind to encourage us. What we must leave behind, however, is our dependence on experiences and achievements.

Jesus spoke of the need to follow him at all costs, including the cost of forsaking human obligations and the weights that tie us down to living in the past. When Jesus invited people to follow him, he was presented with various excuses, like living arrangements, caring for an aging father, and throwing an elaborate farewell party. Jesus said that to follow him requires getting rid of these excuses and keeping eyes straight ahead once behind the plow (Luke 9:57-62). At race time, a runner takes off

the ankle weights used in training. So we are to take off the training weights and run with patience (Heb.12:1).

A colleague told about a fellow pastor who sensed God's call to the mission field, but explained that he had too many commitments to be free to move from his present pastorate. He had family and financial and even pastoral commitments he could not abandon, he explained. Yet the fellow pastor sensed that these were not commitments, but were instead weights. He had too many weights that kept him from following where deep in his heart he knew Jesus was leading him.

Without even knowing, or being able to see for myself, I also had too many weights in my life. I can look back now and see that, even with some heartbreaking experiences, the Lord was "lightening my load," and removing weights from my life, things I was calling commitments, in order to be free to follow him in the next chapter of life and ministry. Leaving the past may be painful, but is necessary to fulfill God's purpose and to live with a godly resolve.

Paul is very emphatic about the main verb of this text. The words are stated and restated: "I press on." "Going forward," in other words. Paul pictures himself as a runner who is pumping his legs in the final stretch of the race, as he rounds the final curve of the last leg in the marathon.

Paul says, "*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal,*" which was to become completely like Jesus. But he knows he'll reach this goal only in heaven. In the meantime, however, he's to keep growing, as Jesus commanded us to keep on being perfect, even as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). He was already made complete as a servant of Christ Jesus, with the maturity and completeness for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2:15), but still had a need to go forward in Christlikeness.

Many of you, like me, have grandchildren, and some likely, great-grandchildren. When they were babies yours and mine were "perfect babies." They had all their ten fingers and toes, and are still incredible creations of God. Perfect. Yet, if they were in the worship service, they might just misbehave. They might cry and even regurgitate (or worse) in front of the entire dignified congregation. But still they would be perfect little babies. But as they grow, more will be expected. The more we live the more is expected of us. There is the demand for more discipline and maturity as we walk with Christ. Like athletes, we are expected to reach and perform up to our potential, as God's "athletes."

Paul says that when Jesus Christ seized him to run in this race he began to enable him to run well (12). Paul's resolve is to live a life of consecration, that is, a life of being dedicated and set apart to run/live for Christ. His ambition is to know Christ in a deeper way, and the power of his resurrection to make him more like Jesus. He was even willing to share in the fellowship of suffering with Christ, i.e. whatever would make him conform to the dying Christ.

Paul's resolve to go forward is impressive: "But this one thing I do." This is a powerful statement of singleness of purpose and resolve. Like a champion runner,

Paul was able to concentrate on the race at hand, and pour himself into the objective of crossing the finish line.

In the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, a race walker representing Australia lost concentration. She was ahead of the field in a 10 K race-walk, in which a foot has to be touching the ground at all times. When she entered the stadium, a great roar came from the huge home crowd who saw her entering so triumphantly. In her exuberance and excitement she lost her concentration, and jumped up in jubilation. The announcer was horrified and so was the crowd when the judge signaled that she was disqualified from the race and forfeited a gold medal. We're easily distracted and bombarded by the media and the din of the world. How we need to be people who listen to God in his word, and concentrate on his word to and will for us!

The imagery Paul uses is that of being seized and enlisted for a race. Imagine being an out-of-shape spectator at a marathon race, and the director of the race comes over and pulls you out of the crowd, and says, "Run, and run to win!" Obviously, this would take an ability not your own. Paul says this is the exact truth for him. One day, out of the blue, when he was on his way to persecute the followers of Christ who were running the race, Christ enlisted him.

Paul knew that when he reached the goal there would also be a prize awaiting him. There was a "crown of righteousness" in store for him (2 Timothy 4:8). Paul says that in this race we can all look forward to being winners and to receiving the victor's crown. The rewards of heaven will be our sharing the glories of being in the presence of the triune God, and enjoying his fellowship (John 17).

In the ancient Greco-Roman games, the winner received a garland of celery leaves wrapped around their heads. Paul is saying we have a much better prize in store for us. The winner of the truly important races would be called up to the box seats where the emperor sat. Caesar would congratulate the winner and crown him with the celery wreath. Paul says those who run to win the race of faith will be crowned by the Lord Jesus Himself, with a crown that will never fade (1 Corinthians 9:25).

Others of us have become discouraged in the race, or have become distracted, and even might secretly want to get out of the race. There have been some times when I was dragging along in a 10-K mini-marathon, wondering what I was doing there with all those lean, lithe, athletic bodies running past and far ahead of me. I wanted to just duck out of the race and walk surreptitiously back to my car and go home.

Some of you may be tempted to "duck out of the race." Going forward simply doesn't seem an option for you. You've tried so many times before and have run into emotional, psychological and relational barriers that seem insurmountable. You're tired and discouraged and have decided this race of forward-moving faith just isn't possible or maybe not even as desirable as before.

You've heard preachers, Bible teachers and your friends telling you just to go forward, to try harder to exercise greater faith, but it isn't working for you. Hearing this sermon, you've thought "That's easy for you to say, pastor." But actually, it's not that easy. I confess there have been times, even in recent years and months (when

I'm supposed to be, as a seasoned pastor, victorious over these struggles) when I haven't been able to practice what I was preaching). I was discouraged and even angry at God. I needed help. And thankfully, God sent his people to encourage me, renew my understanding of God's love, minister to me, urging me to stay in the race.

Let me now encourage you to seek counsel from your minister (me?), friend or family member who cares about you. And you might need to consider professional counseling, including medical and/or psychiatric help, which I believe God will provide for you. Any of these God can use to help you take the steps (and it will take time, perhaps months or years) to get back in the race and go forward in joyful, triumphant faith. It's certainly no shame to ask for help. These people may be God's gifts to you to come alongside of you and help you get back in the race.

Join me, a fellow struggler and sometime straggler, in doing what it takes to go forward.