

Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians

Run the Race!

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Philippians 3:12–4:1

Now let me invite you to take your copies of God's holy Word in your hands and turn with me to Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 3. We are going to read from verse 8 through verse 1 of chapter 4 and you'll find that on page 981 in the church Bibles. Before we read together, let's bow our heads as we turn to the Lord for His help in prayer. Let's pray.

O Lord, we bow before You, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory. We pray that You would give to us a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of our hearts enlightened that we may know what is the hope to which You have called us, what are the riches of Your glorious inheritance in the saints, what is the immeasurable greatness of Your power toward us who believe according to the working of Your great might that You worked in Christ when You raised Him from the dead and seated Him at Your right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come. For we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Philippians chapter 3, reading from verse 8. This is the Word of Almighty God:

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith - that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting

what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken in His holy and inerrant Word.

Accounting and Athletics: Metaphors for the Christian Experience

Last week we studied Paul in a rare moment of autobiography walking us through the great change that has overcome him in his life, right into the middle of his life. The Lord Jesus broke in so that he transitioned from a life of self-righteousness, trusting his own purity and performance and pedigree, and by God's grace he came to trust instead in the righteousness of Christ alone. And the central metaphor Paul used in verses 2 to 11 of chapter 3 to describe that great transition was a bookkeeping metaphor. He counts whatever used to be of gain to him now as nothing that he might gain Christ. It's an accounting image. He's working with profit and loss, with asset and liability. He wants us to see clearly from his own example the bankruptcy of trusting in our pedigree, purity, or performance for our acceptance with God and instead to flee to the righteousness of Christ alone - an accounting metaphor.

This time, in verses 12 through 16 where we shall be focusing our attention this morning, Paul is continuing in that autobiographical mode, only now he's not looking back on his past experience so much as he is talking to us about his current Christian life and how he thinks about its progress moving forward toward the future. And here, the metaphor changes. It is now no longer an accounting metaphor; it is an athletic metaphor. He talks about running the race, pressing forward to win the prize. Probably he has in mind one of the great games of the ancient Greco-Roman world. That is the Christian life he's saying. It is an Olympic marathon race and he wants us to see even in his own example that it will require hard, personal effort, diligence and perseverance and hard work to

run the race of the Christian life.

In verses 9 to 11, the end of the passage we dealt with last week, Paul gave us really a survey, an overview, of the whole Christian life beginning with its justification, its inception, when by faith we trust in Christ and we are counted righteous in the sight of God only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. He says he wants to be “found in Christ, not having his own righteousness but the righteousness which is from God through faith in Christ” - justification. Moving on into sanctification, verse 10 - having been brought into newness of life, sharing in His resurrection, we also participate with Him in the realities of suffering and are conformed to His death. That is, we put sin to death and self to death and we live to Him - sanctification. And it climaxes in glorification in verse 11 - “if by any means I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” There’s the whole Christian life - justification, sanctification, glorification; beginning, middle, and end.

Monergism and Synergism: Sovereign Grace and Spirit-Enabled Work

But there’s some nuance, some theological precision missing in verses 9 to 11 that he now circles back around in verses 12 to 16 to pick up on and address in more detail for us. And it’s the difference between what is called monergism and synergism. Monergism is that way of talking about the beginnings of the Christian life. We are given new birth and we are counted righteous in the sight of God when we believe the Gospel. And in both acts of God’s free grace we are entirely passive. We did not bring ourselves to new birth nor did we earn or merit by our own performance a righteous verdict in the courts of heaven. It is all free, sovereign grace without reference to any work at all of ours, any effort of ours. We were passive; it was monergistic. It was the energy of God alone working.

But now that we have been brought to newness of life and the Spirit of God dwells in us and we are being changed by His mighty operations through His Word and Spirit we are enabled to say “No” to sin and “Yes” to obedience more and more so that the Christian life’s progress from that initial beginning is synergistic. There’s a synergy. We work as God works. God works in us and we work out our salvation with fear and trembling - both working together. There is a cooperation in the Christian life between the believer and the Lord, though the believer’s activity is itself enabled by the prior working of God’s own Spirit within us.

And Paul wants to make that especially clear in verses 12 through 16. You will see both aspects emphasized - our duty and God’s grace. Our duty and God’s grace. We have a race to run and we must run it; He will not run it for us - our duty. And God’s grace - we are enabled, by His operations and work within us, to persevere in that race so that if we trust in Christ and are Christians we will cross the finish line. Our duty and His grace. And I simply want us to look at both

aspects and then think about three of the practical tools Paul also gives us here to help us run our races with perseverance.

I. Our Duty

So first of all think with me here about our duty. "I press on," Paul says, verse 12. He says it again in verse 14. "I press on." In verse 13 he talks about "straining forward." The verb there is full of action and momentum and activity. It indicates a strenuous stretching, a straining at every sinew and muscle in order to make forward progress. He's saying, "I break sweat and I run hard in order to progress in the Christian life. It is hard work and I labor diligently at it."

A Race to Run

He is pushing on relentlessly, diligently, verse 14, "that he might win the prize." It's a race and he wants to win the prize. Growing as a Christian is not a matter of "Let go and let God." There are no passengers in the Christian life. There is no growth, there is no growth, there is no growth that you do not press hard to pursue. There is no such thing as a passive mature Christian. There is no holiness that ever came to any believer's life unworked for. "I press on," Paul says. He wants us to press on, to be diligent, to use the means of grace, the Word and the sacraments and prayer, to be with God's people, to be in the house of the Lord Lord's Day by Lord's Day, to keep the Sabbath Day holy, to seek to do more and more, to say "No" to sin and "Yes" to righteousness, to labor hard, to be men and women of God. A holiness that is not pursued is a holiness that is never won. Holiness is our duty.

A Danger to Avoid

And while Paul affirms and urges us by his own example to press on and to work hard and to make the pursuit of holiness our duty, he also is aware of a danger and so he issues us an important warning. As we seek to run the race he's aware of how prone he is to look back and so he says, look at verse 12 again - sorry verse 13 rather, "One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on." If you're to make progress don't look back. What happens if you try to run a race looking over your shoulder? You will stumble and fall. In Paul's mind here particularly is the old pattern of life that he used to live before he came to know Jesus, a life of self-reliance where he places his confidence for acceptance with God at the bar of heaven's justice on his doing, his activity, the merit of his performance. He says, "I'm never going back to that. I'm never going to confuse justification and sanctification again." You know we so often confuse those two metaphors. Neil Witherow, after the early service, was pointing this out to me. Justification is an accounting metaphor. God reckons us; he accounts us righteous in His sight. And sanctification is an athletic metaphor. We have to run a race. But we want to swap them round and make our

justification into an athletic thing. We want God to accept us because we're good at running the race. We want God to find us righteous in His sight because of our performance. Paul says, "I'm never going back to that. I'm never going to confuse those categories again. I'm never going to look back to the old way, the thought that my activity is what won me acceptance with God. I do not run my race in order to make God love me or accept me; I run my race because He has loved me and accepts me in Christ freely and for nothing but because of His mere and free grace. I'm never going to look back." If you try to run your race looking over your shoulder, harking back to the old ways, you will stumble and fall.

In August 7, 1954, an epic race in Vancouver, Canada took place. Widely anticipated it was an keenly watched event because of the two athletes who were going to be running in that race - Roger Bannister and John Landy. They were, at that time, the only two men in the world who could run a mile in under four minutes. Bannister's strategy in the race had been to relax and during the third lap especially to take it easy somewhat, store up his energy for the final lap and the last burst of speed toward the finish line. But during the race, Landy used the third lap to extend his lead dramatically. He was way out in front. And immediately Bannister began to adjust his strategy as well and he began to gain on Landy and Kent Hughes tells the story of what happened next. He says:

"At the bell for the final lap they were both even, neck and neck. Landy began running even faster and Bannister followed suit keeping pace with him. Both men are flying now. Bannister felt sure he was going to lose if Landy didn't slow down. He wasn't sure he could keep up. And then came the famous moment, replayed," says Hughes, "a thousand times in print and flickering black and white celluloid. As at the last stride before the homestretch the crowd roared. You can imagine in the stadium the swell of cheering as this great competition plays out before the watching crowd. But Landy couldn't hear Bannister's footfalls behind him as they turn into the homestretch and the crowd roars, and so he looks over his shoulder - a fatal lapse of concentration. And just then, Bannister launched his attack and surged past him and won the Empire Games that day by five yards."

Disaster strikes when you run your race looking back. "Forgetting what is behind, straining toward what is ahead, I press on." You are not who you once were. Stop living according to the old patterns. You are a new creature in Christ, believer in Jesus. Press forward with your eyes on Christ, not on your past - your past performance, your past pedigree, your past purity, on yourself, on your stumbles and falls as well as on your successes and triumphs. "Forgetting what is behind, I press on." So we have a duty to perform, a race to run, and a danger to avoid.

II. God's Grace

But then notice secondly as Paul presses upon us our responsibility he comes

along quickly to remind us too of God's free and sovereign grace that will help us persevere and run our race with joy all the way to the finish line. He does that two ways.

The Unbreakable Grip of the Savior

Look at verse 12 again. He says he presses on "to make the final victory," the day of resurrection and glory, he presses on "to make it my own because Christ has made me his own. I want to take hold of the prize because Christ has taken hold of me." The grip of Jesus Christ in his life is what motivates and propels him along the track, along the race of his Christian life. He perseveres and presses on because he feels the unbreakable grip of his Savior working in his heart and life. He knows nothing, nothing can snatch him from his Savior's hand. He is utterly safe there and so he presses on with boldness and with joy knowing this is one race, by the grace of God, he can't lose. He can't lose it. Christ Jesus has taken hold of him.

The Upward Call of God

The second way Paul calls us or encourages us to persevere as we run our race with perseverance is not simply to remind us of the unbreakable grip of our Savior but also of the upward call of God. Paul is thinking here of God's effectual call. That is a call that does not simply come to us in the preaching of the Gospel but as the Gospel is preached the Holy Spirit takes that Gospel and makes it work powerfully in our hearts so that as we hear it we come to life. This is a call that gives what it requires. When it calls us to life, it supplies that life. Here Paul calls it the "upward call of God." It is a call heavenward. When God called him from darkness to life, Acts chapter 9 verses 4 to 9, there on the Damascus Road when his Savior met him, he was called home. He was called to heaven. And because it is an effectual call, an effective call, it is not a mere invitation. It's not as though God were saying to Paul, "Alright Paul, I've made you a new creature. Now it's entirely over to you. Let's see how you run your race. Here's the invitation. I'd love to welcome you home to glory at last but you've got to run the race. And if you don't cross the finish line well then too bad." Not at all. Paul says the call of God in view here is a call that supplies the grace it requires. This is an invitation home that comes with the grace to run your race all the way there. You will cross the line. You will run your race. You can see obstacles ahead of you. You have grown weary in well-doing. Perhaps you've stumbled and tripped along the way, taking detours and turns off the road. But if you are Christ's, His grip can never be broken and God's call supplies you the grace you need to press on. Pick yourself up out of the dust, set your face towards the prize, and get running again. The grace of God will give you the strength you need to persevere. Paul tells us we have a race to run and we are to run it but we do not run it in our own strength.

Three Encouragements to Help the Christian Persevere

Know Yourself

And Paul is a master, having urged us to perseverance, at giving us the tools that we need to help us persevere; not simply encouraging us but being practical in his counsel to us. He tells us three things to do that will help us cross the line in the end. First he says, "Know yourself. Know yourself." Look at verse 12 again. Isn't it remarkable how open and honest he is, how frank he is? He is the mighty apostle. If anyone is a mature believer in these days in which Paul was writing it's Paul himself, right? "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect." Verse 13 - "I do not consider that I have made it my own. I'm not there yet." He's realistic about his progress so far. He knows there's still a journey to be made. But verse 16, "Let us hold true to what we have attained." He's realistic too about his progress so far. He wants to make sure on the one hand that he never begins to coast, to think, "Because I've come this far I'm mature. I'm here whenever the doors are open. I've been a believer for many years. You know I've earned the right to coast for a while." No, no. He says, "I'm pressing on. I'm straining every nerve to make progress." But he's also saying, "I'm aware how far I've come and I don't want to lose the progress that I've made."

Just like you can't coast, neither can you stand still. I've been trying to work out a little. People laughed in the early service when I said that. It was really wounding! I've been trying to work out a little and lose some weight. Sometimes though things get busy around here and my schedule won't allow. Now what happens when you stop working out and stop eating right? You don't just stand still, do you? The weight begins to go back on. If you're not making progress you are not standing still you are retreating. In your Christian life if you're not pressing on you are beginning to fall back. You are beginning to backslide. And Paul is warning us saying, "Press on. Know yourself. Get real with yourself. Don't become apathetic and don't become proud and don't get lazy. Press on."

Know the Prize--Christ Himself!

Secondly he says, "Know the prize. Keep your eyes on the prize." Verse 14 - "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." What is the prize? It's not an abstraction. It's not heaven. It's not glory. It's Jesus! He's the prize. He's what you get in the Gospel. He's what you get in glory. He's the one who makes heaven, heaven. If He's not there, if you're a believer in Him, you could never be happy there. Paul says, "I want Christ. I want to gain Christ," verse 8. He's the prize and I will keep my eyes fixed on Him, the author and finisher of our faith that I may run my race with perseverance. He's gone ahead of me and He waits in advance of me to welcome me when I arrive and I will run so as to gain Him. Unbroken communion with Jesus, face to face forever, no sin clouding your communion and fellowship with Him, no regret searing your conscience but forever with the Lord - that's the prize, so press on!

Know Scripture

And then finally know Scripture - verse 15, "Let those of us who are mature think this way and if in anything you think otherwise God will reveal that to you also." This is how a mature Christian thinks. "I'm not going back to the old patterns. I'm pressing on with my eyes on Jesus." If you're not there yet and you're thinking, Paul says, "I'm confident if you're really a believer God will begin to iron out your thinking, straighten out the kinks in your understanding. He will reveal it to you." The word he uses really means God's self-disclosure in Scripture - *apocalypsis*; it's apocalypse. It means God's revealing Himself to us in His Word. How will God reveal Himself to you? He will do it by Scripture. How will He equip you to run the race and grow in maturity and forget what's behind and keep your eyes trained on the Lord Jesus and His beauty and sufficiency and glory and worth? He will do it by Scripture. You must become men and women of the Word if you're to run your race with perseverance. You need the right equipment to run the race to the finish line. And God has given us His Word that "the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work that you may run all the way and win the prize." Know yourself, know the prize, know the Scriptures. And as you cling to the grace of God and as you remember and remind yourself that you are gripped by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and God's call supplies you with the energy and power you need to win the race, will you press on? Will you get up out of the dirt, shake yourself off, and say, "Let go! Let's move! Let's advance that we might grow in grace!"? May the Lord help us, all of us, with our eyes fixed on Jesus to run so as we might win the prize. Let's pray.

Father, we bless You for our Savior who having run the race ahead of us gives us the grace we need to run so as to win the prize and obtain Him and gain Him. Help all of us to press on, to strain forward to what lies ahead, forgetting what lies behind. For we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

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