

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-4:1

Gospel Call to Perseverance

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Noosa Today 30 October 2020 p46 story of Matt O'Brien

In today's reading from Philippians 3 Paul uses an **athletic metaphor** to describe the Christian race. He says in Chapter 3 verse 12 *"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."* And then verse 13, *"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize ..."*

And then at the end of the passage in Ch4:1 he tells the Philippians, *"Stand firm in the Lord, in this way, dear friends!"* Standing firm does not mean standing still, it just means being resolute, not going backwards but pushing forward in what you have believed and keeping on going. As Paul says in v16, *"Only let us live up to what we have already attained."*

Notice also in Chapter 4:1 that Paul describes the Philippians as his *"joy and crown"*. Paul has here in mind his own race and the prize he longs for. The Philippians enduring to the end will be his prize, his crown.

Tradition has it that the **Olympic Games** were founded in 776 BC and then held every four years. Initially the programme was completed in one day but eventually extended to five. At the start, the games were a simple footrace for men and boys of a single lap of the stadium which was about 220 metres long. It was at the 14th Olympiad that the distance was run twice - 2 laps. At the 15th it appears the long race was added which may have been 7, 12 or 24 laps of the stadium. Paul would have known these races well so he employs the athletic metaphor on a number of occasions in his letters; including to the Philippians.

So today we come to the **Gospel Call to Persevere**. Paul is concerned that the Philippians stay in the race. He wants them to not rest on their laurels but to push on to keep running. In verse 12 he says not that I have already obtained all this ie Resurrection. In v13 he says I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. He also says forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.

It is possible Paul has in mind 3 groups of people who needed to hear this message – Gnostics, Roman citizens, and Jewish believers.

Firstly the **Gnostics**. These were people who claimed a higher knowledge. It may be they thought they had reached a new level of intimacy with God superior to other people in the church. They had special knowledge. They had made it!

The Apostle Paul certainly didn't feel that he had arrived. He puts aside the spiritual achievements of the past and presses on to the future goal.

There are some Christians today who hold to a doctrine called 'entire sanctification' and that it is possible in this life. There are churches which teach the victorious Christian life which is a certain level that Christians can reach and feel they have made it. I don't think Paul sits comfortably with this sort of spirituality. Paul was always aware there was still more repenting to be done, always looking for further progress which was needed, and pressing on toward the goal.

So there are always Gnostic tendencies in the Christian faith and to think you've arrived. I'm sure I've fallen into that trap many times. We should be careful not to go down that path.

Another group Paul maybe addressing here is **Roman Citizens**. Philippi had a proud Roman heritage. It had the honour of being called a colony which meant it enjoyed all the privileges being a Roman city in terms of its local administration and law. The people were Roman citizens who enjoyed freedom from scourging and the right to appeal to Caesar. The coins of Philippi bore Latin inscriptions. People would have been proud of their Roman identity.

To become a Christian and declare Jesus was Lord rather than Caesar was a major step of repentance. There would always be the temptation to give up the faith and return to the high life of Rome - to indulge in the gluttony and sexual immorality of Roman society.

In verse 19 this is what Paul would have been referring to in saying their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. In v18 Paul weeps tears because some of the Philippians have fallen away from the faith. He says that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

V20 Paul wants them to realise that they now have **a new citizenship**, not Rome, but a heavenly citizenship where Jesus is Saviour and Lord. So Paul wants to keep them in the Christian race rather than they drop out and return to Rome. So there are the Roman citizens who need to realise where their true citizenship lies and stay in the race.

Also in the church in Philippi there would have been **Jewish converts**. Paul would have been concerned that they didn't go back to the old covenant with its rules and regulations. He wanted them to stay in the race pursuing the goal of resurrection in Christ.

You may recall from last week how Paul sets out how proud he was of his Jewish heritage. Ch3:5 *"circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for zeal persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on the law, faultless."* Yet Paul considers it all as loss for the sake of knowing Christ.

Paul wants Jewish followers of Christ to be proud of only one thing that is the cross of Christ. In his other epistles he makes it clear he doesn't want them to fall back into their Jewish customs, especially circumcision and food laws. His message is forget what is behind and strain towards what is ahead. V13 He wants them to know the power of Christ's resurrection in their lives and running the race towards their own resurrection.

So there may be Philippians here who had gnostic tendencies, those who were Roman citizens, and those who had a Jewish background.

Paul is encouraging them all to stay the course, continue in the race, and keep their eyes on Christ.

Now the other thing for Paul here is that Christian spirituality involves both **THE NOW and the NOT YET**.

Now we have every blessing in Christ;

Yet we are still to take hold of it in its full reality.

The Apostle Paul exhibits this type of spirituality throughout the passage. Look at v12 (the second part). *"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."* Paul knows that Jesus has taken hold of him. He belongs to Christ because of Christ's initiative, calling him and giving him all the benefits of the Gospel. This is all of grace, *'Christ Jesus took hold of me'*, the Apostle says.

So is the Apostle to just sit back and say,

'I'm just going to enjoy the ride?'

Not at all.

He says, *'I press on to take hold of'* all of this.

It is the same verb – **To take hold of**.

Christ has taken hold of me, He has grasped me, taken control of me.

Therefore I press on to take hold of, to grasp the prize, to attain the goal.

All this effort however, was not about trying to get into God's good books.

It was about the amazement that Jesus had taken hold of him. God's grace had intervened in his life and turned the whole trajectory of his life around.

So for Paul all the blessings of the Gospel are **NOW** because of what God has done in Christ.

But they are **NOT YET**, Paul presses on toward the goal, to win the prize.

So what is the prize? V14 *"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

And if you read verse 20 it says, *"Our citizenship is in heaven."*

So **the prize is heaven**. But what does that mean? The popular image is people with angel's wings, strumming harps, floating around on clouds in the sky.

Well that can't be right, look at the rest of v21 The Lord Jesus Christ is coming to this earth in order to, *"transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body"*. We are going to be given new bodies. The best understanding we can have about this is to look at Christ's resurrected body. After his resurrection Jesus fully interacted with his disciples again, eating meals with them and giving them more of his wonderful teaching. And they could touch him, remember Thomas and the nail prints.

What is most important is that they were in personal relationship with him on a whole new level.

Whatever the next life might be like, (and we really don't have a lot of detail in the Bible about that), one thing we can be sure of is that it will be about **relationship with Jesus** – those who love Him and want to be with Him.

In the Book of Revelation John has a vision of a **new heaven and new earth**. Some theologians like to focus on heaven and others focus on earth. I think we need to hold the two together, so you may like to think of an earthly heaven or a heavenly earth. But one thing we can be sure of, it will be about the presence of Jesus and his smile and a beautiful relationship with him. This is our true home. This is where our citizenship belongs. In the meantime we are sojourners here on earth seeking to bring the values of heaven to this sad fallen world with all its problems.

We **stand firm in the Lord** pressing on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

There is **an annual football competition** that happens between two states and I think the first round was last Wednesday night.

NSW went into the match very short priced favourites while

QLD fielded a rookie team who the experts had written off.

It was ten - nil at halftime, it seemed like a foregone conclusion, the only question was how much would NSW win by? And I think that's how the New South Wales players were thinking.

But guess what? Queensland stormed back in the second half and won the match 18-14.

So my point with this story is that NSW thought they had arrived. They thought everything would just play out according to the script. They didn't realise how much extra effort was still required to win the prize.

Life can be likened to a football game.

-There are lots of hard knocks and setbacks.

-And there are times when we think we're on top and can just go into cruise control.

But my friends, it's not how you start the game but how you finish.

The Apostle Paul knew both success and failure, but he never got complacent. As he says today in this reading, *"Not that I have already obtained all this or have already arrived at my goal but I press on..."* and verse 13 *"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

My friends let's run the race at full stretch and push on towards the goal which is Christ.