

Run, Don't Stop!

A Study of Philippians: Philippians 3:12-4:1

Runners are special people.

They are able to run over long distances and reach a goal that they may not have seen beforehand. They can picture the finish in their minds and then head towards it.

I have no problem picturing the finish to a remodeling project or writing, but running is hard work. It takes determination and endurance. It takes a passion for the goal. Runners are special people. Maybe that is why Paul uses that analogy so much.

In Philippians 3:12-4:1 Paul likens the Christian life to a race that is being run. There is a goal that can be reached and a finish line to be crossed. It is hard work. It will take determination and endurance, but Paul is convinced that the goal is worth it and defeat is not an option.

What other analogies would you use for the Christian life? Explain.

Life can be described in many different ways and the experiences that people have sometimes define the analogy. I like to see life as a roller coaster ride. It has hills and turns and twists. Sometimes things are unexpected and sometimes you are upside down before you know it, but it is a ride.

Paul likes the runner.

He has just shared his one desire – that is to know Christ. He now takes a moment to share how he has not yet arrived at that goal. This should come as an encouragement to you. Paul is admitting that he does not have it all together. He is admitting that there is still work to be accomplished in him and through him.

Do you know someone that seems to have it all together? Why do you say they have it all together?

No one has it all together.

Paul recognizes that a relationship with God is a continuous journey. It is not something that one can arrive at midway through life. It is a lifelong pursuit. In fact, Paul uses that terminology. He says that he had not arrived, but that he presses, pursue repeatedly, or races after so that he can grab hold of what Christ has already grabbed for him. Paul wants to take what is coming to him. It would be like a birthday gift. As children we would sit and wait for the time for gifts to be opened. The gifts would be passed over, but the child would have to reach out and take the gift. The birthday gift belongs to you, but you have not grabbed it yet. Paul is reaching out and coming close to grabbing what has been given to him.

“Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 3:12-14

How does knowing that Christ has a goal and race designed for you make you feel?

There is excitement and anticipation. God has a specific purpose for each one of us and Paul is getting excited about his race. He wants to keep on so that he can finish it well. In this excitement there is almost a sense that Paul already has the goal. Paul can clearly see the end and is convinced of reaching it, but he also knows he still has work to do.

This takes us back to the beginning of the book, where Paul explains that he is going to get out because his time has not yet come. He has not reached his goal. Then in verse 13, Paul explains how he plans on making it to the end. It is almost as if he says,

“I can see it! I can see my Lord and Savior at the goal waiting for me. Oh, I’m not there yet. I still have some work to do. Guys, listen! I am not there yet, but I know how I am going to get there. I am not going to worry about all these things behind me. I am not going to get bogged down with all this stuff. I am going to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus and just keep running. I am not going to stop.” There is excitement in Paul’s words. He is excited about fulfilling his calling in life – the one given by God to bring Him glory.

What does it feel like to know that you are smack dab in the middle of where God wants you?

There is no better feeling and nothing can steal our joy. Paul then calls all believers to have the same excitement and anticipation for the goal. He wants to maintain the standard. Verse seventeen echoes what Paul has been encouraging throughout the book. There is a need to run this race together. Paul calls on the church to join with him in being imitators of Christ.

Then we are called to observe those who are running well. Paul uses an interesting term. It means to spy out or look towards an object or person or even to contemplate. Now I am not calling all of us to start spying on our friends, but there is a sense of contemplating and watching people. Maybe this is why Paul has spent the last two chapters discussing the importance of being who you are no matter who is around because you never know who is around.

Paul now comes to confront the reality that not all believers have their eyes fixed on the goal. Some believers are looking at the things behind them.

What are some of the things that can weight a believer down?

Spiritual maturity and growth will help us to refocus ourselves back on the goal. As we fellowship with one another and encourage one another, we will help one another see the goal. We need that community because it’s a battle out there. Life wants to pull you down. Life wants to try and discourage you and cause you to “sit this one out”. There are causalities in the race.

Paul reminds the church of the seriousness of this race. The point here is that

“Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.”
Philippians 3:17

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.”

Philippians 3:20-21

some finish and some don't. The finishers are determined by those who seek after God's interest rather than their own. The causalities are those who sought after their own interests. It is a reflection of what Paul was saying in the end of chapter 2.

Paul's excitement has turned into sorrow as he thinks of those who choose to follow their own interests. It breaks his heart to see them lose so much and not even realize it. The reality of this fading world and the recognition of the goal bring Paul to remind the church where their true citizenship is.

Why is it so important to see our citizenship in heaven?

Our citizenship is in heaven. Those who do not make it saw earth as their home. They did not want to admit that we are aliens and strangers. They liked what the earth had to offer and took that as their goal. In the end, it was destruction.

We run the race and finish the course, now what? We are running home to our goal – Christ. He will then transform us from these fragile earthly bodies into our glorified bodies. Jesus can do this and no one else can.

It is in this goal – the arrival in our true kingdom and the ability to serve our King – that Paul calls the church to stand firm.

Paul has, throughout this letter, encouraged and challenged the church to be true followers and live a true testimony. He has brought to light how this affects those around them, but here Paul's focus is on the end goal. He is focused on how they finish.

It's like running.

Starting a race is important, but finishing a race determines who ran well.

Let's finish the race.

What do you need to do in response to this lesson?
