

Park Road Baptist Church 12th September 2021

Order of Service and Sermon

Song All creatures of our God and king

Song Crown him with many crowns

The Bible teaches that the Christian life is a bit like running in a race – and that’s what we are going to be thinking about this morning.

If that’s the case, then how are you getting on?

Are you still running strong, or have you become more of a spectator?

Listen to these words from Hebrews 12 verse 1, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”*

Who is this great cloud of witnesses that are watching us and willing us on? It’s so encouraging to hear people cheering you on.

Running challenge

What are some of the things that can slow us down in the race that God has marked out for us?

Song I have decided to follow Jesus (Simon Marak)

Receive the offering followed by prayer

Bible reading: Philippians 3 verses 12 – 21 (Pam Brenton)

Sermon: Running the race

In the 13 letters in the New Testament written by the apostle Paul, there are quite a number of references to different sports.

He speaks about wrestling, and he speaks about boxing and about running. And he speaks about winning the race and winning the prize.

And when Paul comes to the end of his life and he wants to sum everything up, this is what he says in 2 Timothy 4 verse 7, *‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.’*

And that will be our theme for today as we think about Philippians Chapter 3 verses 12 – 21. Going forward and pressing on in the Christian faith in the face of all kinds of difficulties.

At this point, I was going to show you an old black and white clip from the 1954 Commonwealth Games from Vancouver. It was the 1-mile race and Roger Banister and John Lundy from Australia were the two favourites. John Lundy led the race for most of the way and twice he looked over his shoulder to see where Roger Banister was. On the second occasion, he looked over his left shoulder and Roger Banister

overtook him on his right side and went on to win the race. Lundy came second and both men ran under 4 minutes.

Most of us start off the Christian life full of energy and enthusiasm but all too often we don't end the Christian life with the same zeal for God that we started with – somewhere along the line we lose our focus.

And so, in this passage, Paul gives us 4 principles for staying focussed right through to the finishing line.

Here's the first;

Stay humble – remember you are a work in progress

I'm going to read from verses 12 – 14.

'Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: 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.'

There is something that is just so refreshing about these words – *'not that I have already obtained all this or arrived at my goal.'*

I'm really encouraged to know that Paul had similar struggles to the ones that we have. And it's all the more remarkable when you think of the achievements of the apostle Paul.

He planted churches everywhere – in Antioch and Galatia, in Philippi and Berea, in Thessalonica and Corinth. And when you add to that the fact that he wrote half of the New Testament.

That is a lot of accomplishments in the kingdom of God, and I would say without doubt that Paul is the most influential Christians who has ever lived. Not one of the most, but THE most influential Christian there has ever been in the history of the church.

And yet, for all of that, he says he hasn't yet arrived. Twice he says he presses on. In other words, Paul is very aware of his own imperfections and weaknesses. He is not perfect – like you and I, he is a work in progress, so stay humble.

Follow your leaders.

In verse 17 he says, *'Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.'*

This is a tricky one for me to talk about and even for Paul it can sound as if he is boasting.

If you want to learn to pray – Paul says, follow my example.

If you want to learn to share the gospel and be a good evangelist – follow my example.

If you want to see a life where God's love and compassion is very evident – then follow my example.

If you want to know God better – Paul would say, follow my example.

I don't think many of us would say that, but we need good examples of Christians who are running their race well.

With that in mind, let me ask you two questions. Who are you following? I've been a Christian for nearly 40 years, and I still need the example of other Christians that I can look to and say, *'yes, that's how to run the Christian race.'*

During my 11 years at Lochgilphead in Scotland there were quite a few people in the church that I looked up to and wanted to emulate.

Whether it was the joy of the Lord that just oozed out of them or their hunger and appetite for God's word – seeing people with their Bible open at church and even taking notes – what a challenge and encouragement that is for a pastor. For others, it was their graciousness and constant encouragement.

They were just such a blessing that I wanted to be more and more like them. One or two of them were in their eighties and from the outside they didn't look very strong or impressive and yet they were as strong as ever because their love for Jesus was so evident.

So, who are you following?

The second question is, who is following you?

You do know that people are looking at your life – don't you?

Does your life inspire others to walk closer to Jesus?

Do people look at you and look at me and say I want what you've got?

That could be an infectious joy.

It could be a humble, teachable spirit?

It could be a love for the lost and the lonely?

Remember, we are running this race together and we all need good examples to follow.

One of the things I often do when I'm in a running race is that I find a runner whose pace is just slightly quicker than my own and I tuck myself in behind them.

In the Christian life, we need those who will stretch us and challenge us and inspire us and encourage us so we can learn from their example, but we also need to be those that challenge and encourage and inspire others as they run the race God has for them.

Know your enemy and love God's people. (v18)

'For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.'

Paul says that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ – that's quite a statement that makes you sit up and take notice. So, Paul warns his people with tears.

When you think of Paul, it's very easy to think of him as this militant preacher with skin like a buffalo, and almost emotionless.

But here he refers to his tears.

Let me read some verses from 2 Corinthians Chapter 2. In 1 Corinthians Paul deals with a number of difficult issues within the church – like sexual immorality and pride and divisions to name but a few.

Now, listen to these words. He says, *'I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.'*

And then in Acts Chapter 20 Paul gives this great farewell speech to the church at Ephesus. Listen to these words, *'I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.'*

Once again, we see Paul's love for God's people.

But Paul is also aware of those who are enemies of the cross of Christ – here he describes them as savage wolves, who will arise even from within the church and their purpose is to lead us away from Jesus.

If you spend too much time with them, your faith will soon become lukewarm and insipid.

Remember, we are running this race that God has marked out for us. And if we are going to run this race well, we will need those who inspire us and challenge us and encourage us to live humbly and prayerfully and courageously and faithfully.

But, we also need to be on our guard, as Paul says, because there may be those who will hinder us, perhaps in very subtle ways as we run the race (and that can even come from people in the church).

Remember your identity.

Remember who you are. Paul talks about that in verse 20 when he says, *'but our citizenship is in heaven.'*

We are just temporary residents here – our real home is in heaven.

These words would have been very relevant for the church at Philippi because Philippi was a Roman colony. Although Philippi was hundreds of miles away from Rome, back in 42 BC the emperor Octavian gave it the honour of becoming a colony of Rome.

If you walked around the streets of Philippi, it would be like walking around the streets of Rome. People would dress the same and talk the same, the architecture would be the same.

A bit like if you go to Gibraltar today – you will find Union Jack's everywhere – they are probably more British than we are. It's against this background that God says we are citizens of heaven.

So, if you are a follower of Jesus then your name is in heaven, your reward is in heaven, your treasure is in heaven and your Saviour and redeemer is in heaven. And just when you think it can't get any better, Chapter 3 ends on this fabulous note, Paul says, *'we eagerly await a Saviour from there who by his power will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.'*

Isn't that fabulous!

In the Message it says, *'he will make us beautiful and whole'*.

This is Paul thinking about the finishing line.

Elsewhere as he thinks about the drama of this moment he says, *'we will all be changed.'*

But, Paul, how long is this going to take? Is it going to be a long process?

'In a moment,' he says, *'in the twinkling of an eye.'*

What an amazing thought that is;

No more aches and pains.

No more doctor's appointments.

No more fear or anxiety

No more masks etc. etc.

With such a finishing line in view, let us fix our eyes on Jesus and run with perseverance the race that God has marked out for us.

Song Yet not I, but through Christ in me

Blessing