

PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL

October 15, 2023

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Old Testament Lesson; Isaiah 5:1-7

The Psalm of the Day; Psalm 118

Gospel Lesson; Matthew 21:33-43

Sermon Text; Philippians 3:12-21

Our scripture reading is taken from Philippians chapter three, verses twelve through twenty-one.

“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus also took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it yet, but there is one thing I do: Forgetting the things that are behind and straining toward the things that are ahead, I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, let all of us who are mature continue to think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this to you too. Only let us think the same thing and walk in line with what we already have attained.

Brothers, join together in imitating me and in paying attention to those who are walking according to the pattern we gave you. To be sure, many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. I told you about them often, and now I am saying it while weeping. Their end is destruction, their god is their appetite, and their glory is in their shame. They are thinking only about earthly things. But our citizenship is in Heaven. We are eagerly waiting for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. By the power that enables Him to

subject all things to Himself, He will transform our humble bodies to be like His glorious body.”

These are your words, Heavenly Father. Lead us in the way of truth. Your Word is truth.

Amen

Back in 1977 there was a young man from a small town in Minnesota. His name was Dick Beardsley. He decided to run a marathon. So, he ran a marathon that happened to be in a little town way up in northern Wisconsin, called Hurley, Wisconsin. That is way up on the northern border. He ran this marathon that is over twenty-six miles long. He did pretty well, and he enjoyed it, so he decided he was going to try to run some more marathons. Over the course of the next few years, he ran a number of marathons. He actually made it in The Guinness Book of World Records! He is the only person who has run thirteen marathons, and consecutively gotten better, and better times in each marathon, which is his kind of a claim to fame. He began to get so good at running marathons that he actually qualified for the very prestigious Boston Marathon in 1982.

So, he shows up in Boston, in 1982. People knew about him, but he was not expected to win the Boston Marathon.

There was a guy that year (*if you were a kid during that time, maybe the name Alberto Salazar rings a bell*) by the name Alberto Salazar. He was this world class, record holder, marathon runner. He was running in the Boston Marathon that year, and everybody knew he was going to win.

When the gun went off, they started running. About half way through the marathon there were four guys who were clearly in the lead. And, if everything kept going the way it was, one of those four were sure to win. Two of them were Dick Beardsley and Alberto

Salazar.

By the time they were three quarters of the way through the marathon, it was clear one of two guys was going to win, if everything kept going ok. Those two guys were Dick Beardsley and Alberto Salazar.

As they got near the very end of the marathon, those two guys were neck and neck the whole way. They both knew there was this long, really steep ascent that is kind of a 'gut burner'. If you can make it up that hill, and if you go fast enough, and your opponent tries to keep up with you, he might get burned out, and not make it. So, both of them knew, *“The other guy is going to try to burn me out on this hill. I am not going to let him do it.”*

They both ran up that hill, trying to burn the other one out, as fast as they could. When they got to the top, they were still neck and neck. They got closer, and closer to the finish line. When they were a thousand feet away, Alberto Salazar was just a little bit ahead of Dick Beardsley. As they got closer and closer to the finish line, Dick Beardsley got closer and closer. Just as they got to the finish line, they both looked up at the screen, and it said, “Two hours, eight minutes, and then some seconds. *(That was the first time in the history of the world two men running in the same race had made a marathon in under two hours, and nine minutes!)* When they crossed the finish line, Alberto Salazar beat Dick Beardsley by two seconds!

When they were on the winners stand, Alberto Salazar was standing on the top step. He received the award, and when he did, he pulled Dick Beardsley up the side so they were standing side by side. He held up Dick Beardsley's hand and said, “I never would have ran this fast, if you had not beside me.”

Dick Beardsley went on to become a motivational speaker. And, as he liked to talk to people about goals they want to accomplish in life. He came up with this famous little saying about any goal you want

to accomplish in life. Here is his famous saying.

“When you 'cross the finish line' (*he was talking whatever goal you want to accomplish*) whether fast or slow, your life will change forever.”

Now, I don't know how accurate that statement is, with a lot of goals we may accomplish in life. But, I am going to tell you something. When it comes to what St. Paul is talking about today, when you 'cross that finish line', whether fast or slow, your life will change forever. I want to talk about this forever change that is going to happen, when we 'cross that finish line', in faith, by faith, through faith in Christ, as our Savior.

Let me pause for a second, and ask this question. “*Why are you a Christian? Why are you a Christian?*” That is a bottom line, gut level question. I am going to tell you why I am a Christian. I am a Christian, because I am messed up, spiritually. I am a Christian, because I have spiritual problems. I am a Christian, because as much as I don't want to, I sin every day. I think things, do things that I should never be thinking, or saying, or doing. I don't want that. And, I sure don't want the guilt. I sure don't want the punishment that should go along with that. I don't want any of that. I don't want that sin to rule in my life. I want God to be my friend. I want all of God's promises to be mine. So, the reason I am a Christian is because, I am not perfect, and I need somebody else's righteousness to be my own, so I can be God's friend. I can be right in God's eyes, and all of God's promises are true to me.

That is why St. Paul, right before he writes what we read today says, “*I want to be found having a righteousness not of my own, but that which comes through faith in Christ Jesus.*”

I am a Christian so that I can have Christ's righteousness as my own righteousness. My sins are forgiven, and because of that, I am on my way to Heaven.

I am going to tell you something. I hope that is not the only reason

why you and I are Christians. That is not the only reason Jesus saved us. Jesus never intends you, He never intends you to have to struggle with guilt all the rest of eternity. He never intends you to have to get up every day for the rest of eternity, and know, "*I am going to mess up today. I am not going to live a perfect life today.*" Jesus saved you. And in this life, He sees us as perfect for Christ's sake. But, Jesus saved you so that some day, someday when you cross that 'finish line', you literally will be made morally perfect. Go home today, and just ponder the implications of that. When I 'cross that finish line', I am going to be made morally perfect for the rest of eternity. I am never going to be jealous. I will never pout. I will never be arrogant. I am going to be morally perfect. And, I will be with all of the other people who are morally perfect, forever. We think we have good relationships now. Imagine that!

In fact, not only that, but let me tell you something that happened to me last week. I conducted a funeral last Monday of a lady by the name of Blanche Armson. (*Maybe some of you remember Blanch.*) Blanche was 97 years old. She was very quiet. I don't know if she ever maybe said more than a couple words during a conversation. Pretty much she just answered questions, yes or no. That was about it. She was very humble, sweet, and she was very private. She basically stayed at home all of the time, all throughout the time I knew her.

Her husband, Graham, (*many of you remember Graham*) is one of the first guys I am going to look up, when I get to Heaven. That guy had an incredible knowledge of Scripture, incredible. He took care of Blanche, and treated her like a queen in their home.

Blanche had a favorite possession. Her favorite possession was a little tiara, like a queen's tiara. If you walked into their house, you would see a picture, a family picture that was about maybe fifty years old, with their young family. She was sitting in a chair, wearing this queen's tiara.

Very late in her life, when she was nearing the end of her life, her family, (*she only had three close relatives that were left*), took her to a lawyer to make sure everything was good to go. The lawyer asked her, “*What did you do for an occupation?*”

Blanche sat up in her chair, straight as could be, had a sparkle in her eyes, and said, “*I was a house queen.*” A house queen. So, she died.

On the day I got to the funeral parlor, there she was, laying in the casket, and she had this tiara on. There was the house queen.

That was a wonderful opportunity to talk to the three family members who were there about her being a house queen. I said, “*Now that tiara she is wearing pales in insignificance to the crown she has received.*”

In The Bible, The Bible talks about believers receiving a crown. It is not the Greek word that we would call '*diadem*', like a '*king's crown*'. But, it is an '*athletic crown*'. It is the crown the athlete won, when he had won the race, when he had won the battle, when he had won the fight, and he received this crown. I said as, we were looking at Blanche, “She has now received three crowns. Here is what they are.

**'Be faithful unto death,
and I will give you the crown of life.'”**

Then, we talked about how now Blanch has eternal life. Death can never hurt her, again.

But then, there are two other crowns that are mentioned in scripture. Not just the crown of life. St Paul said,

“I have fought the good fight.

I have run the race.

I have kept the faith.

**And now there lays stored up for me a crown of righteousness
which the Lord, the righteous judge,
will award to me on that day.**

Not only to me, but to all who long for His appearing.”
The crown of righteousness. I talked about how now Blanche has received righteousness. She does not need Jesus' righteousness anymore, because He has made her righteous. She has made it across the goal.

And then The Bible says,

**“When the Great Shepherd appears,
He will award us with a crown of glory
that will never fade away.”**

What is that crown of glory? Not only will you be made morally perfect, when you cross that 'finish line', but our scripture today says,

**“Christ will transform our lowly bodies
so that they will be made like His glorious body.”**

So, not only do we have problems with moral imperfection in this life, but we have problems with physical imperfections. There are plenty of people in this room and those reading this, who are dealing with all kinds of physical problems – sickness, illness, diseases, and maybe missing body parts. We struggle with how our hair looks. We struggle with warts and pimples. But, when we get to Heaven, The Bible says we will be more than satisfied with our physical being. So, that is what is waiting on the other side of 'the finish line'. When I was younger, there was a race up in Sauk Prairie I wanted to run. Every year they had The Cow Chip Festival, and you get to throw cow chips. There is a race called, The Cow Chip Fun Run. The whole reason I wanted to be in it was because I knew if I was in it, I would end up getting a tee shirt that had a picture of a cow chip running. I wanted that award. And, I got it!

That is nothing. That is nothing compared to what waits for us when we finally 'cross the finish line'. In fact, that is the motivation Paul says,

**“Not that I have already obtained this,
or have already reached the goal...”**

(most translations say,)

**“Not that I have already obtained this,
but made perfect,
not perfect yet,
but I press on to take a hold of that for which
Christ Jesus took hold of me.”**

Paul's motivation in 'running', to continue to stay a Christian, and run the faith is look at what is waiting on the other side of that 'finish line'.

**“I press on to take hold of that for which
Christ Jesus took hold of me.”**

I heard a pastor explain it this way. It is kind of like this. Imagine you are a mom, who has prepared a wonderful meal for your child. You pick up your little child, and take hold of them so that you can carry them to that wonderful meal. As you are carrying them to that wonderful meal, your child sees that wonderful meal. They reach out to it, because they want to take hold of it.

So, you took hold of them, so they can have the meal. And now, they are reaching out, so they can take hold of it.

That is why Jesus purchased you.

We say in the explanation to the Second Article of The Creed,
“Jesus has purchased and won me, a lost and condemned creature, and not with gold or silver but with His holy precious blood, and His innocent suffering and death in order that (*here is why*) I might be His own, and live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”

Paul says that is the goal. That is such motivation to stay running the Christian race, and stay in the faith.

Paul also says to be aware of some things. Number one he says

**“Forgetting the things that are behind,
and straining toward the things that are ahead,**

**I press on toward the goal,
for the prize of the upward call of God
in Christ Jesus.”**

There is danger if you are a runner, looking behind, over your shoulder. You could lose your way. You could trip, and fall. You could get passed, by other runners. Runners should always stay focused on their goal.

Paul says to be careful, and don't look behind, and lose your focus. In Paul's life he was talking about, *“I am not going to look back to the old way I thought I could get to Heaven.”* Paul used to think he could get to Heaven by living a good life, by earning his way to Heaven. He said, *“I am not looking back, and get tripped up by that. I know now that the only one way to Heaven, to 'the finish line'. It is to trust in Christ's righteousness, as my righteousness. I am not going to be tripped up.”*

There are other things that can cause us to look behind, and get tripped up. Maybe you have some massive guilt. You look back, and you think, *“That mountain of guilt is so big, I don't know if God will ever forgive that.”*

Paul says, *“Don't look back at that. God has already forgotten that in Christ. That is gone. It is forgiven. Press on toward the goal. Cling to faith in Christ.”*

Then, he warns us about watching other runners who have gone in other directions. He says, *“Don't follow them.”*

He talks about people who go after their own appetite. You know, we can be running through this life, as a Christian, and it can be hard being a Christian. It can be grueling being a Christian. We can see people going in other directions, and we think, *“Boy, it looks like they have popularity.”* *“It looks like they are having real success in life.”* *“It looks like they are having fun.”* *“It looks like they get all the pleasure they want. Why don't I just run that way, instead?”*

Paul says,

**“Their end
(in other words their 'finish line')
is destruction...”**

So, consider the end game. Scripture tells us to stay focused, long term, on what is coming.

Then Paul says, *(talking to his fellow believers)*, “*Follow my example.*” What was Paul's example? Well, if there is anybody who had a grueling race, and had a difficult time, as he went through life being a Christian, and had to 'run up some pretty steep inclines, pretty steep hills that were real gut burners', Paul, by the grace of God, kept running. His focus was, “*I want to reach the finish line. I know what is coming, after I have reached the finish line.*”

So Paul says,

“...join together in imitating me...”

A runner wants to keep themselves hydrated, and eat the right foods, and Paul did that. He stayed 'hydrated, and well fed' by using God's Word regularly in his life. And, Paul stayed surrounded by fellow Christians.

Remember when Alberto Salazar said to Dick Beardsley, “*I never would have run this fast, if you had not been beside me.*”

Let's run with other Christians who encourage us along the way. In the book of Hebrews it talks about the great heroes of faith. There is this chapter, Hebrews, chapter eleven, with the great heroes of faith. They are all people who 'ran that race', and they made it all the way to 'the finish line'. Now they are in Heaven. They are perfect, morally perfect. And, when The Day of Resurrection comes, they will be made physically perfect. The Bible talks about this. It is like they are up there in the stands. They are the audience, and they are watching you run the race. Here is what it says in Hebrews twelve.

**“Therefore since we are surrounded
by such a great cloud of witnesses *(all these who made it to
Heaven)*,**

**let's throw off everything that hinders,
and the sin that so easily entangles us,**

and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

So, let's throw off sin that can 'trip us up'. And let's 'run towards that goal', so that one day when you reach the end of your life, you can say,

“I have fought the good fight.

I have run the race.

I have kept the faith.

**And now there lays stored up for me a crown of righteousness
which the Lord, the righteous judge
will award to me on that day.”**

Won't that be awesome, when all of us can hold hands, raise our hands as the victors, and say, *“We made it, because of Christ!”*

Amen

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts, and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen