

Press On for the Prize

Philippians 3:13b-14

This 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 heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Comments

This week our focus is on Paul and his letter to the small church in Philippi. Paul was an incredible man: a brilliant thinker, an apostle with indefatigable energy and commitment, and a great spiritual leader. Internalizing Paul's words is a way in which Paul's spirit can become present and alive in you. In fact, one way in which the great leaders of our faith become present now is by the work of learning their words and remembering them in our hearts and in our relationships with others.

Paul's letter to the Philippians has traditionally been considered as written during his imprisonment in Rome and I think that is probable. As we learn in the last parts of Acts, Paul appealed to Rome after his arrest during a riot and the attempt to kill him in the Temple by radical Jews who opposed his mission to Gentiles. After his journey to Rome, he was held under house arrest until his hearing before the Emperor. He was held for nearly two years waiting for his trial. At the time of writing this letter, he assumes that his hearing will be soon, that he will be found innocent and will be released.

Apparently the hearing did not go well and this may be Paul's last letter. The two-year wait probably meant that his trial came during the period of Nero's persecution of Christians in the aftermath of the great Roman fire. Nero probably set the fire in order to clear a slum area for a major building project he wanted to do. Many Christians were killed by wild animals in the Circus Maximus and crucified in Nero's gardens. It is probable that both Paul and Peter were martyred during that reign of terror.

Philippi was a Macedonian city named after Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, who was the most famous Macedonian in history. In the first century Macedonia was a province of the Roman empire. It was a large and prosperous city with a growing population.

The Philippian church was probably Paul's favorite church with which he had an unambiguously positive relationship. Philippian Christians were his most generous supporters, both financially and personally. A sign of this was that they have sent Epaphroditus, a member of the community, to be a personal servant for Paul during his imprisonment.

Paul's metaphor for his life is the race. The ancient Olympic games were held in Olympia in southern Greece and were famous throughout the world. A runner cannot look back without losing ground. I actually saw a couple of cross-country skiers look back during the recent winter Olympics but they were well ahead. Runners of short races never look back.

By "forgetting" Paul means paying no attention or refusing to be concerned about something. He is actually trying to forget the past; he simply refuses to be concerned about what is behind him. Paul is dealing with the issue of what to forget and what to remember. Sometimes we remember and dwell on all of the hurts and insults of the past and carry grudges or regrets that paralyze us in relation to what we are doing now or in the future. My friend, Raymond Gombach, has a great phrase for this paralyzing preoccupation with past resentments or failures: "Build a bridge and get over it." That is Paul's spirit. Forget the struggles of the past and focus on the challenge and promise of the future.

Paul had plenty of things that he could feel confident about from the past. The list of his credentials and achievements as a Jew that precede this verse are his examples. This is a sign that many of the recipients of the letter in Philippi were Jewish and would share these values. Judaism is Paul's heritage, his lineage and the source of his past achievements. He counts all of this, his entire life work prior to becoming an apostle of Jesus Christ, as nothing, as "rubbish" in comparison to the resurrection. Paul's hope is to share in Christ's glorious body. This may be a reference to his experience of his vision of Christ on the Damascus road.

Paul's spiritual posture is to stretch forward in order to reach what is ahead. His mental picture is the runner with his eyes fixed on the goal, his hand stretching out to it, and his body bent toward the finish line. With bow and arrows, the goal is the target; in a foot race, it is the finish line. To get there first is the goal. That is the invitation to us. Paul suggests that we think of ourselves as runners who are striving to win the prize, the medal of victory, the award in games or contests in the ancient or modern Olympics. The image that comes to mind is the winners at the winter Olympics holding their gold medals.

But the prize for which Paul is striving is the prize of eternal relationship with God, eternal life. That is a prize that is possible for all of us. The hope of the future for each of us is the hope of the new life of the glorious body of Christ's resurrection. And that prize is won by entering Christ's suffering now and enduring whatever suffering we may experience as our contest. That is the endurance race we all run. And the goal is the prize of resurrection and eternal life with Christ.

Exercises

Suggestions for discipleship formation this week...

- ❖ Read Philippians 3:4b-14 through out loud once, and then read Philippians 3:13b-14 (printed in bold) several times. Here are the verses:

I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard 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 one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; **but this 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 heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.***

- ❖ What are your credentials for worldly status? Your heritage, your degrees, your achievements? Can you imagine tossing them in a rubbish heap, garbage can, or dumpster so that you can find your value in Christ Jesus? Talk to God about it.
- ❖ Draw yourself (a stick figure with your name on it will do fine.) Now draw a big gold medal hanging around your neck and imagine someone saying, "Congratulations! You won the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus!" You might even write that in a conversation bubble.

