

Learning to last the distance

Phil 3:12-4:1

[1min video of jockeys misreading the end of their race]

You can't help but feel a bit sorry for those two jockeys, can you?

No doubt they would have both received a rocket after their races were finished.

When prize money is at stake,
When punters have placed big money on the outcome,
Then mistakes like that are not taken too lightly.
"What a disaster!" cries the race-caller in the second example.

What makes these examples even more painful

is that each jockey was just moments away from winning,
the finishing post was right in front of them yet they failed at the last moment.
Somehow they lost their focus, they allowed themselves to get distracted,
their eyes shifted from the finishing post and they ended up on youtube.

Horse racing has a long history. They used to race horses in the ancient world;
races like the ones we've just seen as well as chariot races.

It was just one sport among many that were popular in Biblical times.
I'm not sure the apostle Paul ever mentions horse racing itself,
But he certainly mentions other sports on a number of occasions.
Sport was one of his favorite ways to speak about the Christian life.
And one example can be found in the passage that we are looking at today.
Philippians Ch 3:14 I press on toward the goal *to win the prize*
for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.
By using the word *prize* he's taking our imaginations into the ancient stadium
where winning athletes would be awarded the prize of a special olive wreath.
If Paul were writing this letter today, he might have written
"I press on toward the finish line to win the gold medal".

And what is the actual goal behind the metaphor,
what is the actual prize that Paul is alluding to?

Well, we heard a bit about this last week.
Cast your eyes back to the end of v 10 where Paul speaks about
attaining to the resurrection from the dead.
The goal is eternal life,
The prize is a life lived with God in a resurrected body that will last forever.

But like any prize there is a race that needs to be run before hand,
and as we learnt from the examples we've just seen on the screen,
sometimes competitors don't finish in the way they might have planned.
The question we're asking today is this:
How can we avoid a disastrous finish like our two jockey friends?

In our passage Paul gives us two tips to help us grab the prize,
 But first it helps if we know a little bit about the kind of race that we are in.
 Philippians 3:12

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.

In verses 12-16, Paul outlines a finely balanced truth about the Christian life.
 To run a successful and enjoyable race,
 there are two truths that we need to uphold.

The first is that every Christian is in a winning position – victory is ours.

Paul says that the prize of eternal life is a goal for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.
 In the old King James Version of the Bible, v12 has Paul speaking about a goal
 for which also I am *apprehended* of Christ Jesus.

Just like a police officer might grab and apprehend a thief,
 So to Christ has grabbed us under his authority and is walking us,
 not to a prison cell, but into eternal life.

Victory is ours! We are at the front of the pack! The prize has our name on it!

But we still have to run!

This is the second truth that we must be convinced by;
 The race is still in progress.

Verse 13 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, ¹⁴I press on toward
 the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

It's a race that may have had its fair share of tension.

Sometimes when they are interviewing a gold medal winner
 you may hear the athlete say something like
 "Well, I knew if I stuck to my race plan then things would work out"
 I don't think any Christian person can say that about the race towards heaven.
 Paul's own race seems to have had some stumbles along the way,
 Did you hear what he said in verse 13? Forgetting what is behind.
 If anyone had a bad race towards eternal life then it would have been Paul.
 He was a persecutor of Christians, he was an enemy of God's church,
 and yet there came a day, and you can read about it in Acts ch 9,
 when Christ Jesus grabbed hold of him and set him on a different course.

You yourself may think that you have disqualified yourself from this race,

Perhaps, like Paul, your own story is one that you'd rather forget
 But this is where we need to remember our first truth:
 We don't run this race on the basis of our own ability or performance.
 If anyone receives the prize of eternal life

then it's only by the mercy and grace of God.

It's the work of Jesus that will bring us across the finish line,
 But he does ask us to run with him in the same direction as he drags us along.

One sport that has exploded in popularity over the last 10 years or so is cycling.
 As one friend said to me recently, "it's the new golf".
 20 years ago middle-aged men would head out on a weekend for 18 holes,
 Now days my friends squeeze themselves into lycra and head out on the bike.

Along with this has come an increased interest in the Tour de France.
 Again, many of my friends set themselves up for some very late nights each
 July. I enjoy watching it, not only for the cycling, but also for the scenery.
 The race lasts for 3 weeks and the competitors have to complete 21 stages.
 The final stage is a ride into Paris with 7 laps of the Champs-Élysées.
 But did you know that the victor is determined on the day before. There is an
 agreement that who ever is in front will not be challenged during the final
 stage, and so you will often see footage of the champion cycling into Paris
 holding a glass of champagne. It becomes a celebratory victory ride into the
 capital.
 But to receive the prize he still has to cross the line.
 He can't leave to catch an early flight home the night before!
 He needs to finish the race.

And that's the kind of race that we find ourselves competing in as Christian people:
 Victory is assured, but we're still on track.
 Paul summarizes our position in v 16
 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.
 Christ has guaranteed our prize, so let's live up to our status as winners,
 running at the right goal with a full head of steam.

So how can we ensure that we do finish well?
 The rest of our passage has Paul acting as a bit of a coach,
 helping the Philippians prepare for the finish of the race,
 helping the Philippians—and thereby helping us as well—
 avoid the disaster of throwing it all away.

The first tip he has for us is one we've spoken about already in this series,
 He speaks about the power of finding some good models
 V 17 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.
 We spoke two weeks ago about how Paul upheld his co-workers,
 Timothy and Epaphroditus, as two people who were worthy of honour,
 two people who were worth taking note of.
 We spoke about how the Bible is full of examples of men and women
 who demonstrate great faith in God,
 how the history of the church contains many similar examples,
 how we can find people here, within our own congregation,
 who are worthy models of how to run the Christian race.

Now, two weeks later, Paul provides for us another reminder:

Who are you seeking to watch and observe?
 Who in the Scriptures have *you* learnt from over the last two weeks?
 If we want to finish well, then we must be learning from others who have finished well in front of us.

Conversely, there is also great wisdom in recognizing who might be a bad model.
 It seems that Paul stresses the importance of finding good models because he recognizes that there are so many bad models out there.
 V 18 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.

How might someone live as an enemy of the cross of Christ?
 Well, Christ died to save us from sin,
 and an enemy of the cross is someone who seeks to undermine Christ's work.

An enemy of the cross might deny that the cross achieves anything.
 This was the situation that Paul was facing,
 we heard in last week's passage that some people were going around saying that you needed to follow the ceremonial laws of the OT,
 that Christ's work on the cross was not enough;
 and in saying these things they were denying the power of the cross to save.

Other people might seek to undermine the cross
 by leading us back into the sins that the cross saves us from.
 "Oh!" they might say, "God doesn't expect you to take his word *that* seriously!"
 "he doesn't really want you to give up *that* behavior
 or to change *this* way of thinking.
 God wants you to be comfortable and happy!"

God actually wants us to be holy, and to be joyful in our holiness.
 that's why Jesus died on the cross, to cleanse us of our sin,
 so it makes no sense to turn around and dive right back into the things
 that we've been rescued from.

But there are some people who will influence us to do just that.
 And Paul says "be aware of these people! Be aware of these bad models!"
 V 19 Their destiny is destruction,
 These people are headed straight for God's judgment,
 so guess where we'll end up if we allow their influence to rule us,
 we'll follow them straight into hell.
 their god is their stomach, Instead of serving the God of the Bible,
 these models are serving their own impulses and desires;
 they'll devote themselves to whatever it is that feels satisfying
 and their glory is in their shame. The very things that ought to bring them shame
 are the things that they take great pride in.
 [You see this on social media all the time...]

Their mind is set on earthly things, Paul concludes.

These kinds of influences are everywhere, we can't really avoid them, although, given we are so susceptible to influences a little bit of self-imposed censorship is not a bad thing.

[Game of thrones ...

I decided it was not the kind of show that's going to help me as a Christian. Certainly parents ought to be keeping a close eye on what your children are exposed to, because we learn and are formed through exposure]

At the very least, Paul would have us identify the bad influences, and seek to counter them with the more positive role models. This is one way we can ensure we don't get distracted before the final post.

And a second way is make sure our eyes know what the prize looks like.

But our citizenship is in heaven Paul writes in verse 20.

All we're really doing when we seek to control what we're influenced by is to live in a way that's consistent with our identity.

If we are followers of Jesus then our identity, our citizenship, is not going to be found here in this world, rather it belongs in the next world.

Some families will send their children to cultural school on Saturdays
as a way of keeping in touch with their ethnic heritage.

Seeking out good spiritual role models
is simply a way of us keeping in touch with our true spiritual identity.

And as citizens of heaven we have a glorious future to look forward to.

This is the prize that's waiting for us in the age to come:

Vs 20-21 And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

What do you think eternal life is going to be like?

One thing that surprises many people when they read the Bible is just how physical it will be.

People might think that we'll just float around as disembodied spirits, floating on clouds and playing harps.

But the Bible speaks of a new earth; same planet but but totally renewed.

And in this verse Paul speaks of transformed bodies.

Once a fortnight I conduct a church service in the Masonic Towers nursing home just on the other side of Hornsby Hospital.

Whoever labeled old age 'the golden years' obviously didn't spend a lot of time in a nursing home.

Many of the people I meet there have dementia, some have no teeth, some can hardly sit up straight in their wheel chairs.

Every single one moves with the help of a walking frame,

But, every single one of those residents who have put their faith in Jesus will one day have these broken down bodies transformed.

I look forward to the day when I meet with them after Jesus' return, because I will see a very different group of people: a group of perfect people, living in a perfect world, for a perfect eternity.

I used to be a runner.

When I was a young Adult living with my parents there was a course I used to run around our local streets.

The first half of the course was all downhill, the second half was all uphill, and so I needed some motivation to make it across the finish line.

Here's what I used to do. I used to imagine that I was in the Olympic marathon, and as I rounded the second last bend I used to imagine that the Olympic stadium was coming into view. And then as I rounded the very last bend I was running into the stadium, with the crowd on their feet, and my parent's driveway was the finish line! Tell me I'm not the only one!

It helps to have a glimpse of the glory that's waiting at the end of the race.

And Paul is giving us a glimpse of this glory;
there is a wonderful prize waiting for everyone who,
in God's strength, manages to finish the race.

Therefore, quoting Paul in ch 4.1. stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

Let's keep our eyes on the prize,

Let's surround ourselves with people who will help our progress
rather than hinder it

And Let's make sure we cross that finish line.

Amen.