

Sermon File # 874

Scripture Text: Philippians 3:12-16

Sermon Title: *Resolved in 2008...*

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Resolved in 2008...

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Philippians 3:12-16, as we look today on this first Sunday of the New Year into Paul's letter to this church he loved so dearly, and which he was so concerned to encourage in their spiritual warfare.

In the previous verses we read about Paul's impassioned appeal to the church to fend off the inroads of the Judaizers, those legalistic pseudo-Christians who sought to add to the gospel of Christ the additional requirements of becoming a Jew before becoming a Christian. Paul upheld the true gospel as being salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Christ is above all other religions and is the only way to salvation. And we must not add to the requirements for salvation, else we pervert the gospel and rid it of its saving power. Paul noted that if it were possible to be saved by legalistically obeying the demands of the law, he would be the first to qualify. Yet he clearly admitted that he could not be saved on his own merits and by his efforts. And then Paul shared his ambition to keep on knowing Christ in his resurrection power. To know Christ's resurrection power demands that we also share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, and that we enter into the pattern of his cruciform life of death to self.

The text for today, which begins with verse 12, seems to be Paul's response to correct a possible misunderstanding. Perhaps there were those in the church who were advocating a position of sinless perfection, and Paul was afraid they might distort his words about knowing Christ and becoming like him. Paul wanted them to understand that he is always striving to be like Christ, and that he is on a continuous spiritual journey toward total Christ-likeness.

Follow as I read Philippians 3:12-16.

In the early years of my ministry I read Jonathan Edwards' list of resolutions. I was and still am amazed by the discipline, devotion and determination that defined the life and ministry of this great theologian, pastor and leader of the Great Awakening in the 18th Century American colonies. One of his 70 resolutions was: "(number) 6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live." Jonathan Edwards was a man who had a Paul-like determination to strive for spiritual success and to fulfill all of his God-given potential. Reading those 70 resolutions made me realize my need to live with a greater and higher sense of determination and resolve (For the complete list, see E:\Historic Church Documents at Reformed_org.htm).

Our text for today is a great statement from the Apostle Paul about his resolve to fulfill God's purpose for his life, what God had given him in Christ and to live a life that is available to all of us. We live in a culture of driven-ness—driven for success, for work production and for self-fulfillment. Paul says that each one of us who claims Christ as Lord and Savior has a life given by grace and enabled by the Holy Spirit. Our part is to resolve to live that life with all of our might. Paul also knew that we strive with the energy that God powerfully works in us (Colossians 1:29). Our resolutions are futile apart from the power of the Spirit in us.

In verses 1-11, Paul seems to be using the analogy of an accountant. Paul compares the way he assessed his life before Christ with the way he now assesses his life in Christ. We will note that before Christ, Paul considered all his personal religious attainments as gain, and the Christian movement and the followers of *The Way* were his enemies and represented the negative column in his life. After meeting Christ, Christ alone was in the gain column and everything that came between Paul and Christ was now placed in the loss column. Now, from the language of an accountant, Paul turns to use the language of an athlete, which he does on numerous occasions in his letters (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:4-7; and Hebrews 12:1, for those who argue for Pauline authorship of this letter).

As Paul reflected on his life, while in prison because of his faithful service for the Lord in the face of hostility, he gathered a new and greater resolve for the next and perhaps final chapter of his life. It would have been easy for him to have indulged in a "pity party," since he was in prison unjustly, and it seemed that his faithfulness to the Lord got him nothing but trouble. But Paul shows the resolve of a great

athlete, who is straining every nerve to win the contest of life, for which Christ Jesus recruited him. He, like a great athlete, lives with a sense of purpose and resolve, much like an Olympic distance runner, who trains and prepares year round, and for years, in order to win. Christians, as well as athletes, must be, as was Paul, competitors with resolve.

To resolve is to act with determination and with “fixity of purpose” (*Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*). Paul expresses a very worthy resolve which was the highest possible, and yet was very attainable for him. But Paul expresses a resolve that also is realistic for every follower of Jesus Christ. It is worthy, because it will demand everything we can give to its fulfillment. Since it represents the will of God, it is also an attainable resolve. If God commands it, he also enables it. Paul would say that we all are in the great race of the life of faith, and it’s a life worthy of our greatest resolve and effort.

We see in our text, in verses 12-16, Paul’s resolve...

➤ **To leave the past**

Paul says that, like a good runner, he is forgetting the things that are behind, and is not running backwards nor even looking over his shoulder at the other runners and the distance he has already covered. He’s not basking in his success in the race, nor is he fretting over how he could have done better to this point.

I might add that Paul commends memory, along with the rest of Scripture, of those things God has commanded us to remember. We are, like Israel of old, to remember God’s great acts of salvation in our behalf. We are commanded to take of the Lord’s Supper as a reminder of the cross and of God’s calling us to salvation (Luke 22:19). The Psalms always call us to remember the great things the Lord has done for us (e.g., Psalm 126).

Great Methodist preacher of bygone days, Clovis Chappel, says this text shows some of Paul’s common sense. The Apostle knew how to keep his life uncluttered by using a “wastebasket” (Pages 230ff, vol. XI, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*). My wastebasket is absolutely essential in keeping my life uncluttered. E-mail has helped immensely, but I still get reams of ads (even from church and parachurch groups promoting various ministry and market opportunities). We need to use a wastebasket and e-mail “delete” where we can toss a lot of emotional and mental and other clutter we have accumulated over the years.

Going back to the race analogy, Hebrews 12 calls us to run the race of the life of faith, and admonishes us to take off the weights that keep us from running our best (Hebrews 12:1). Ankle weights are good for training, but when it’s time to race, get rid of the clutter and encumbrances. Some of the clutter from the past can be destructive.

Thus, there must be...

- *Forgetting the destructive*

Had Paul dwelt on his past, he would have self-destructed. When he spoke of the past he said he was an enemy of the gospel, and persecutor of the church, and the worst of sinners (Philippians 2:6; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 1:16). He would have dragged himself down in overweening guilt. But he understood God's grace had forgiven him completely, and removed his sin from him as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

I know you find this hard to believe ("tongue in cheek"), but even to this day that Accuser, Satan, brings up to my mind shameful things I did even in my youth. All of us must seek God's gracious forgiveness for and deliverance from the accusing memories of past sins and wastefulness. In Christ we are free to move beyond the destructive acts of the past.

Even after his conversion, Paul was not sinlessly perfect. Nor did he always succeed in his ministry. But obviously Paul did not let his failures and bad experiences with others bog him down. He was opposed doggedly and bitterly by his enemies, and was undermined and falsely accused by fellow ministers (especially the "super apostles" he mentions in his letters to the Corinthians).

Paul was able to leave behind, throw in the wastebasket, as it were, all these bad experiences. He never gave the root of bitterness the opportunity to grow inside him (Hebrews 12:15). Some of us here today face the danger of letting bitterness over the past rob us of a useful and joyful life in the Lord. I know I continue to fight a battle over thoughts and feelings about past injustices and injuries. Paul's ability to "forget what is behind" is something I admire and am seeking to emulate.

I recall a quote by Corrie ten Boom, who called for believers to find joy in knowing God's forgiveness and grace that releases us from guilt and the root of bitterness. She said that God has buried our sins in the deepest sea, and has placed a sign over the waters that says, "No fishing!" We must leave thoughts about the past, either our sins or injustices we have experienced. Know God has buried them, and we must not go fishing for them.

Leaving the past includes also...

- *Forsaking the unnecessary*

Paul was one whose life was also unencumbered by his past accomplishments. He mentions some of his credentials and accomplishments in verses 4-6, but says compared to gaining Christ these were all garbage. If he dwelt on them or relied

on them they would become impediments in his running the race of faith and service.

An athlete can lose his effectiveness when he revels in his achievements and attainments. Over two years ago I heard a reporter interview cycling great, Lance Armstrong, who subsequently won his seventh Tour de France, an unprecedented accomplishment, before he retired from cycling. He was asked what was going through his mind when he crossed the Alps for the last time in his career. "Didn't you feel nostalgic, knowing that was the last time you will ever cross the Alps in the Tour de France?" Lance answered, "I have to be honest with you. It never even crossed my mind." Great athletes are not distracted by unnecessary regrets or even nostalgia, over either defeats or accomplishments.

God gives us spiritual blessings that meant to encourage us, but we cannot afford to live by those mountaintops. We are to keep running the race with the same sense of dependence on the Lord we had as newborn Christians. There is much that you will carry from the past. Of course, great memories can inspire. Worship services and mountaintop experiences can be a lifetime encouragement. Sermons and Bible studies heard in the past can come to mind to encourage us.

What we must leave behind, however, is our dependence on experiences and achievements meant to be momentary and temporary. Churches too can be guilty of looking back to the glory days, and complaining that things are not like they used to be. Such churches are doomed to being dragged to death by the past. I'm reminded of that passage in the prophet Ezra, when the old timers wept when they saw the newly rebuilt foundation while remembering how glorious it used to be. The sound of joy from the celebrants of the rebuilding could not be distinguished from the noisy weeping of the mourners over the lost past (Ezra 3:11-13).

Fred Craddock, commenting on Paul's statement in verse 13 about "forgetting what is behind," notes that nobody is keeping score (*Interpretation: Philippians*). Yet I've known church leaders who not only have been keeping score, but also keep reminding others of all their good works and merits from the past. These people look at church life as a competitive means of gaining eternal and temporal rewards, including power and control over others. They think like stockholders, and view their contributions to the church as an investment that earns them a right to recognition, power and control. Paul would say, "Forget it. You have no more claim upon God than the pagan who was converted five minutes ago."

I was impressed by a comment from Marv Levy, successful coach of the Buffalo Bills NFL (US professional football) team even into his 70's. He told the interviewer that the secret to his success was learning to not become cynical. He kept his mind fresh with new ideas, and refused to become cynical with dwelling on how great it used to be compared with the present. I think Paul would agree with Coach Levy at least on that point. So much dwelling on the past becomes an

encumbrance, whether it's our dwelling on destructive thoughts or our dwelling on the unnecessary preoccupation with the past—things that were good and useful for then, but now ought to be left behind, never to be repeated.

Jesus spoke of the need to follow him at all costs, including the cost of forsaking human obligations and the weights that tie us down to living in the past. When he invited men to follow him, he was presented with various excuses, like living arrangements, caring for an aging father, and throwing an elaborate farewell party. Jesus said that to follow him requires getting rid of these excuses and keeping eyes straight ahead once behind the plow (Luke 9:57-62). A good runner takes off the ankle weights used in training.

I once heard a preacher tell about a fellow pastor who sensed God's call to the mission field, but explained that he had too many commitments to be free to move from his present pastorate. He had family and financial and even pastoral commitment he could not abandon, he explained. Yet the fellow pastor sensed that these were not commitments, but were instead weights. He had too many weights that kept him from following where deep in his heart he knew Jesus was leading him. Without even knowing, or being able to see for myself, I also had too many weights in my life. I can look back now and see that, even with some heartbreaking experiences, the Lord was "lightening my load," and removing weights from my life, things I was calling commitments, in order to be free to follow him in this next chapter of life and ministry. Leaving the past may be painful, but is necessary to fulfill God's purpose and to live with a godly resolve.

Notice also Paul's resolve...

➤ **To live in the present**

Paul is very emphatic about the main verb of this text. The words are stated and restated: "I press on." The future and past concerns he has expressed are with dependent clauses. The main statement is "I press on" and "this one thing I do" and again, "I press on...."

Here Paul pictures himself as a runner who is pumping his legs in the final stretch of the race, as he rounds the final curve of the last leg in the marathon. As Jonathan Edwards wrote as his sixth resolution: "Resolved, to live *with all my might*, while I do live" (above citation). Particularly in the verses that precede our text (8-11), Paul speaks of his need to live and to run the race...

- *With consecration*

As I noted in the introduction, in our text Paul is probably addressing those who may have incorrectly assumed that in verses 1-11 he was saying he had reached a level of spiritual perfection. Thus Paul quickly adds, "Not that I have already

obtained this” (verse 12). In our text Paul uses the same word “teleios” to refer to final perfection and “functional” perfection (See Frank Thielman, *NIV Application Commentary: Philippians*). Paul’s goal is to become perfectly holy and sinless as is Jesus, but knows he will reach this goal only in heaven. In the meantime, however, he is to keep growing, as Jesus commanded us to keep on being perfect, even as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). In verse 15, Paul refers to the mature, the functionally perfect, who though not sinless-ly perfect, are where they ought to be in attitude and commitment to obey and to keep on growing.

By the grace of God Paul had received the free gift of God’s imputed righteousness. He was already saved in terms of being justified and acquitted by Holy God. He was also made complete as a servant of Christ Jesus. This seems to be the maturity and completeness Paul refers to in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2:15, when challenges young Timothy to be equipped by the inspired Scriptures for every good work. The calling of the pastoral-teaching ministry is to lead the people of God to be equipped with this kind of maturity for useful service in the Kingdom (Ephesians 4:12). Hebrews chides immature believers who still need to be coddled with babies’ milk, when in fact they should have become teachers of others (Hebrews 5:11-14).

Throughout the past year we were blessed to see parents dedicating themselves to the task of parenting their new born babies. Who wouldn’t agree that these are “perfect babies”? They have all ten fingers and toes, and are incredible creations of God. Perfect. Yet, you saw how they misbehaved! They cried and regurgitated in front of the entire dignified congregation. But still they are perfect little babies. But as they grow, more will be expected. We are saved by grace and immediately are made righteous in God’s sight. Yet, the more we live the more is expected of us. There is the demand for more discipline and maturity as we walk with Christ. Like athletes, we are expected to reach and perform up to our potential, as God’s “perfect” athletes.

Perhaps Paul is thinking about the analogy of a runner who trains and conditions himself to be at his best for the race. Paul says that when Jesus Christ seized him to run in this race he began to enable him to run well (verse 12). Paul’s resolve is to live a life of consecration, that is, a life of being dedicated and set apart to run/live for Christ. In 1 Corinthians 9:25 and 1 Timothy 4:7-8, Paul speaks of our need to be like athletes who go into strict training in order to run to win.

In this life of consecration, of our being set apart to run the race of faith, Paul realizes the greatest work before him is to grow in holiness. As he expressed in verse 10, his ambition is to know Christ in a deeper way, and the power of his resurrection to make Paul more like Jesus. He was even willing to share in the fellowship of suffering with Christ, and whatever would make him conform to the dying Christ.

The great servant leaders in the church through the ages have been those most conscious of their human weakness and their need to depend absolutely on God for grace for his forgiveness and divine empowering. Those who have made the greatest mark in the Kingdom have been those who were most conscious of their sinfulness, and of their desperate need to know Christ in a deeper way, and to receive the power of his resurrection. Paul certainly expressed this as his ambition (in our text). Again, like a champion athlete, Paul wanted to avoid every pitfall that would disqualify him. He feared being disqualified for the prize of winning the race of faith (1 Corinthians 9:27). A runner can become disqualified because of his breaking the rules or from being injured.

Paul knew also that this life of being like Jesus and living in fellowship with him was not for the faint of heart. He told Timothy to be sure to tell the church that all who live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). Paul seems to be saying in verse 11 that Christ can be known best and in the deepest way only by conforming to his death. Perhaps this is a reference to death to self, and taking the way of the cross.

Paul knew that consecrated living in Christ involved a life of obedient service. When he gave the testimony of his dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul told King Agrippa his conversion story, and said he was not disobedient to the vision from heaven (Acts 26:19). This vision was the calling of God to Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul's intense life of service was not one of being busy for God, and burning out for God. His service was the overflow and outflow of his inner consecration and passion for Christ and the gospel.

In this busy world of frenetic activity, we as Christians must beware of working for God rather than walking with and serving alongside Jesus, who, although always actively seeking the lost and making disciples, was never in a hurry. But a consecrated life is one that is outward and other-concerned, and never selfish or self-centered.

Andrew Fuller was a Baptist pastor in England at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, who was instrumental in encouraging and sending William Carey on his first mission venture to India. As a pastor he preached almost every Sunday to address the felt needs of his people, and he was distressed by their remaining spiritual babies. When he became the first General Secretary of the Baptist Foreign Mission Society, he led his church people into missions involvement. As they became involved in doing missions, he noticed they no longer had the former personal issues and problems that used to demand so much of his attention. They had lost themselves in consecrated service, in doing the work of the Great Commission.

Paul resolved to live in the present with consecration, but also...

- *With concentration*

Listen to Paul's resolve: "But one thing I do." This is a powerful statement of singleness of purpose and resolve. Like a champion runner, Paul was able to concentrate on the race at hand, and pour himself into the objective of crossing the finish line first.

I recall in the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, the loss of concentration of a race walker representing Australia. She was ahead of the field in a 10 K race-walk, in which a foot has to be touching the ground at all times. When she entered the stadium, a great roar came from the huge home crowd who saw her entering so triumphantly. In her exuberance and excitement she lost her concentration, and jumped up in jubilation. The announcer was horrified and so was the crowd when the judge signaled that she was disqualified from the race and forfeited a gold medal. How despondent she was, and humiliated before her own countrymen.

Paul was a singularly minded man, who lived in one Book, and who preached the one gospel, and had this one ambition to make Christ known (Romans 15:20) and also to know Christ better (Philippians 3; 10). Because Christ is so vast, and the word so deep, one can be devoted to the word and to Christ and never have to worry about being a narrow person.

In the windows of the bookstore at Regent College there are posters, with photos of and quotes by famous Christian thinkers and writers. One of them is of the late Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and the quote is by Malcolm Muggeridge from his biography of her. He said she never reads a newspaper or news weekly, and she never watches TV news or listens to radio newscasts. Therefore, he said, she understands the world.

By contrast, we are distracted and bombarded by the media and the din of the world. How we need to be people who listen to God in his word, and concentrate on his word to and will for us! Paul was a highly informed and broadly educated man, able to quote Greek and Roman literature in his preaching and writing. But he had a sharp and narrow focus because of his magnificent obsession with Christ and his constant living in the Scriptures. All his life had one objective, to know Christ and to make him known. He kept in the race, and kept his eyes on Jesus and the goal and the prize. It was his attention to the word and his life in the Spirit that kept him shielded by the armor of God and kept him qualified for the prize (Ephesians 6:10-20).

John Piper captures the heart of Paul's sense of resolve and purpose when he speaks of our need to "go hard after God." We need, he says, to have a holy dissatisfaction with our lives the way they are. This culture is so bent on helping people feel better about themselves, and he says the way of the world is to help people become more confident about themselves, and yet the kind of confidence the world seeks is rooted in pride. People, including Christians, try to seek self-

esteem by being elevated in the eyes of the world, and by appearing “cool and intelligent.” Piper says we need a “holy dissatisfaction” with our spiritual life, and then, as Paul himself did, “go hard after God,” dying to what the world thinks, and seeking to draw nearer in fellowship with Christ and living to honor, delight in and please him (www.soundofgrace.com/piper84/010884m.htm).

Our eyes must be concentrated on Jesus all the way if we are to stay in the race.

Paul expresses, finally, his resolve...

➤ **To look to the future**

In verse 14 Paul gives the reason why he is in the race in the first place. He’s trying to reach the goal and win the prize at the finish line. Paul was heavenly-minded, having responded to the heavenward call of God.

The very next resolution of Jonathan Edwards, number 7, is : “Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life” (above citation). He resolved to live each day and hour in the light of eternity and realized the eternal implications of all that he did.

This past October, the Chicago Marathon took place the same weekend as our son’s wedding in Minneapolis. It was so unseasonably warm that for safety reasons the marathon was cancelled halfway through the race for the slower, more recreational runners. Only those who were competing to win were allowed to continue. The heat was too great a health risk for the “social” runners. But Paul says he’s running the race, not to be seen or to enjoy the company of others, and whatever the conditions he is running...

- *With a goal to be reached*

Paul is expressing, beginning with verse 8, his all-consuming desire to reach the goal of knowing and becoming like Christ Jesus. Remember, Paul is not writing as a potential or even as a new convert. He has known and followed Christ for years, and has become a seasoned and fruitful man of God and his powerful servant. But he still has not reached his goal, his ultimate goal.

But the perfection which is Paul’s goal is the perfect forming of the character of Christ Jesus in him. In its absolute, final form this goal awaits heaven, when we will become entirely and exactly like Jesus (1 John 3:2). But in the meantime we are to be ever striving after complete conformity to the character of Christ Jesus (Galatians 4:19).

The imagery Paul uses is that of being seized and enlisted for a race. Imagine being an out-of-shape spectator at a marathon race, and the director of the race

comes over and pulls you out of the crowd, and says, "Run, and run to win!" Obviously, this would take an ability not your own. Paul says this is the exact truth for him. One day, out of the blue, when he was on his way to even persecute the followers of Christ who were running the race (when he was hindering others who were in the race, not even being an innocent bystander), Christ enlisted him.

A goal that cannot be attained in this life may seem futile to you, but like Paul, you can know that every year and even every day you are nearer to that goal as Christ works in you.

Paul had a worthy resolve to look to the future not only with a goal but also...

- *With a prize to be won*

Paul knew that when he reached the goal there would also be a prize awaiting him. He told Timothy there was a "crown of righteousness" in store for him, and not only for him, but for all who have longed for his appearing (2 Timothy 4:8). Paul says that in this race we can all look forward to being winners and to receiving the victor's crown.

Jesus Himself spoke of laying up treasures in heaven, and of looking forward to our heavenly reward (Matthew 6:19-24). The glory of heaven is not something materialistic, as though we earn stocks in heaven we can flaunt before others. Eternal rewards are commensurate with eternal life. I believe heavenly reward will be the size of our capacity to receive and enjoy the fullness of God, based on the degree of our faithfulness to him and the quality of our walk with him on earth (Luke 19:17).

Some believers and some Christian music speak of heaven in a quasi spiritual but very materialistic way. For some, heaven is having more for eternity, and it seems to be more of the things we are selfishly trying to accumulate here. Will we be surprised by the rewards of heaven! According to Jesus' prayer in John 17, the rewards of heaven will be our sharing the glories of being in the presence of the triune God, and enjoying his fellowship.

In the ancient Greco-Roman games, the winner received a garland of celery leaves wrapped around their heads. Paul is saying we have a much better prize in store for us. The winner of the truly important races would be called up to the box seats where the emperor sat. Caesar would congratulate the winner and crown him with the celery wreath. Paul says those who run to win the race of faith will be crowned by the Lord Jesus Himself, with a crown that will never fade (1 Corinthians 9:25. And Peter echoes this in 1 Peter 5:4).

Notice that the goal for Paul comes before the prize, and the prize is dependent on reaching the goal.

The rich young ruler was a post-modern consumer before his time. He came to Jesus wanting eternal life as an attainment and a reward without the relationship with Christ and the running toward the goal of obedience and of being like the Master, who was forsaking all (Mark 10:17ff). He was into seeking rewards without running the race of faith and of being after the goal, which is Jesus himself and our sharing his likeness.

CS Lewis spoke about the judgment seat of Christ before which we will all give an accounting. He noted that when we stand before God on the final day, there will be no external advantages or disadvantages. These will all dissolve, and our true selves, the part of us that chooses good or ill, obedience or disobedience, will remain. Then we will see ourselves, says Lewis, as we really are, and that moment of revelation will surprise us (as paraphrased by Frank Thielman in *NIV Application Commentary: Philippians*, from Lewis' *Mere Christianity*). It seems that the crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8) will be determined by the righteousness we have received and appropriated through a life of faith and obedience.

This seems to be what Jesus is teaching us from the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. The redeemed people of God will be surprised by the works of grace in their lives that gave evidence of their being children of God ("Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you..."). We are saved by grace, but will be judged by the evidence of grace-saved and transformed character. Frankly, this gives me pause and is an incentive to me to keep on working out my salvation with fear and trembling. I must keep on running the race of becoming like Jesus and obeying his will.

Like Hebrews 12: 1-2 says, this race called the Christian life is about running with perseverance the race God has marked out for us. And we must fix our eyes on Jesus. He is the goal and his blessings and our capacity to enjoy and serve him in heaven is our prize.

This future God has marked out for you is more than worthy of any of us.

Conclusion:

When Paul went to Jerusalem, against the warnings that he face danger there, he countered that he was willing to face certain hardships in order to finish the race marked out for him (Acts 20:23-24). Some here today have never entered the race. Like Paul was as Saul of Tarsus, you are on the sidelines either as a spectator or as a distracter and opponent of God's Kingdom and people. Perhaps today Christ Jesus is laying hold of you and bringing you into the race of faith.

Others of us have become discouraged in the race, or have become distracted, and even might secretly want to get out of the race. There have been some times when I was dragging along in a 10-K mini-marathon, wondering what I was doing there with all those lean, lithe, athletic bodies running past and far ahead of me. I wanted to just duck out of the race and walk surreptitiously back to my car and go home.

Today you need new resolve to stay in the race, and run for the goal and the prize, which will make it all worth it. We're all pilgrims and here we have no lasting city, as Hebrews tells us (13:14). But if we all live our days with resolve to stay in the race, we'll meet at the finish line.

In verses 15-16, Paul says, in effect, that we are all in this race together. We've all been given purpose for living. Paul expresses confidence that the Philippians who aren't yet on board with Paul, perhaps those who had fallen under the influence of false teachers, will eventually get on board and join the race. This is a lesson I need to learn, that I can trust God to work in people who as yet don't seem to understand or obey the word. Paul closes this thought by saying, "let's simply focus on our running the race with resolve" (verse 16). God will then reward faithfulness.

Each year a medal is given to everyone who finishes the Brussels Half Marathon. Several years ago my Dutch language teacher proudly showed us her medal the Tuesday following this race. (This was true for the mini-marathons I used to run. I was pleased that there were still medals left when I reached the finish line!) The giving of a medal to all finishers is a very biblical idea. Paul says all who finish the race of faith will be viewed as God's winners (2 Timothy 4:8). And, I believe there is a special glory and commendation from those who persevere in the race through suffering and all kinds of difficulty. There will be the sharing of a greater degree of Christ's glory. Christ will share his eternal glory with the faithful and persevering.

Kent Hughes tells the following story about a veteran American distance runner named Bill Broadhurst:

"In 1981 Bill entered the Pepsi Challenge 10,000-meter race in Omaha, Nebraska. Surgery ten years earlier for an aneurysm in the brain had left him paralyzed on his left side. Now, on that misty July morning, he stands with the 1,200 lithe men and women at the starting line. The gun sounds! The crowd surges forward. Bill throws his stiff left leg forward, pivots on it as his foot hits the ground. His slow *plop-plop-plop* rhythm seems to mock him as the pack races into the distance. Sweat rolls down his face, pain pierces his ankle, but he keeps going. Some of the runners complete the race in about thirty minutes, but two hours and twenty-nine minutes later Bill reaches the finish line. A man approaches from a small group of remaining bystanders. Though exhausted, Bill recognizes him from pictures in the newspaper. He is Bill Rogers, the famous marathon runner, who

then drapes his newly won medal around Bill's neck. Bill Broadhurst's finish was as glorious as that of the world's greatest—though he finished last. Why?" asks Kent Hughes, "Because he ran with perseverance" (K. Hughes, pages 160-161, *Hebrews*, volume two).

This greatest of all races, the life that glorifies God, is one we can all win, and we all get the prize as we reach the goal. I expect, from all he says in his parables about a final accounting and stewardship of life, that our crucified, risen Lord Jesus will be the first to greet us at the finish line. It would be good to receive from him what Paul refers to as "the crown of righteousness," and to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:21).

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What were the circumstances in Paul's life that would have made it difficult for him to think he could successfully "run the race of faith"?
2. What are some of the things in your past that might make it difficult for you to run the race of faith and fulfill God's purpose for your life?
3. What needs to be done for these barriers from the past to be removed?
4. What do you think might be the "functional perfection" (or maturity) which Paul expects us as Christians to achieve?
5. What is the absolute perfection for which Paul hopes, and when do you think it is finally reached?
6. What do you think will bring God's greatest rewards in heaven?
7. Are there any resolves or changes you need to make in order to better prepare for our final accounting before God? In prayer, make your requests known to God.

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