

Perseverance of the Soul

Philippians 3:12-14, Proper 22-A
October 5, 2014

When you read St. Paul's letters in the **New Testament**, it becomes readily apparent that the **Apostle Paul loved sports and all sorts of athletic competitions!** If St. Paul was living among us today, I imagine that he would really enjoy having a **70" FLAT SCREEN COLOR TV** in his home and that he would occasionally take out time from his great work as a missionary to enjoy watching all sorts of sporting events like football, soccer, basketball and baseball games in **high definition** on **ESPN**.

Let me share with you just a few of those New Testament references:

In **PHILIPPIANS 2:16**, Paul writes: *"Hold fast to the Word of life, so that on the day of Christ I can be proud that I did not run in vain."*

In **GALATIANS 5:7**, Paul says: *"You were running well, who hindered you from obeying the truth!"*

In **2 TIMOTHY 4:7**, Paul writes, *"I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race!"*

In **I CORINTHIANS 9:24**, Paul writes: *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it!"*

WHILE ST. PAUL DID NOT WRITE THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS, he would have been in complete agreement with what its writer does say in **HEBREWS 12:2**: *"Let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely and run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despised the shame and is now seated at the right hand of God!"*

BROTHERS AND SISTERS, MANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE VERY LITTLE INTEREST IN SPORTS AT ALL will still take out some time **TO WATCH** some of the **WINTER OLYMPICS** and **SUMMER OLYMPICS** on television, because we all are amazed at these competitors' tremendous athletic abilities! What we so often forget is that so many of them **ARE ORDINARY PEOPLE** just like us, with **regular jobs** and **families to support**. Some are even pursuing **college degrees**. **YET, each of them is focused on reaching an extremely high goal and that goal is not only to become a contestant in the Olympic Games but if at all possible to bring home the gold.**

Friends, **ST. PAUL CERTAINLY HAD SOME IMPORTANT GOALS FOR HIS LIFE TOO!**

(1) Among them was his goal to travel around the then-known world to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; a responsibility and a privilege that had been given to him according to the stewardship of God's grace unleashed in his life (Ephesians 3:8).

(2) Another one of Paul's personal goals was to write some very inspiring and instructional letters to various New Testament churches; some of which had been established and founded by him and some of which were founded by other people. But St Paul's **MAIN GOAL IN LIFE WAS ALWAYS TO KNOW JESUS CHRIST!**

No matter how well Paul already knew Jesus, he wanted to keep on getting to know the LORD JESUS as his SAVIOR better, and better and better. He wanted to know Jesus better and better and better, so that he could also come to know in this life already the power of Christ's resurrection. Paul wanted to know Jesus better and better even if this meant he had to share in Christ's sufferings, so that becoming like Christ in his death, confident of his own future resurrection, he could indeed attain one day the resurrection of the dead! (Philippians 3:8-11)

All of this took place in **RESPONSE TO ST. PAUL'S OWN CONVERSION** to the Christian faith; a great transformation in his own life that he always attributed 100% to the grace of God; seeing himself as totally unworthy and undeserving of God's salvation. Paul speaks of this great transformation in verse 7 of our text: *"But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!"* Another good translation of this Greek passage is: *"Whatever was to my profit, I now consider a loss for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus and being found in him!"* Brothers and sisters...

Paul's main goal in knowing Jesus Christ is that he might live with him one day in heaven! Later in this same chapter Paul writes in verses 20 and 21: *"Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself!"* **What must we do to reach that goal, especially since any goal worth pursuing always involves SACRIFICE, COMMITMENT, DETERMINATION and DEDICATION?** St. Paul says that we must first of all be focused!

I. BE FOCUSED.

Paul writes: *"But **one thing I do**"* (v. 13)! In other words, Paul was a man with a single focus; a single aim and a single purpose in his life and this was **TO KNOW CHRIST JESUS, AND TO KEEP ON GETTING TO KNOW HIM BETTER AND BETTER AND BETTER.**

Have you ever noticed the eyes of Olympic runners when they are standing on the starting line waiting for the gun to be fired? They aren't focused on the **OTHER RUNNERS STANDING ON THAT STARTING LINE** with them! They aren't focused on the **thousands OF PEOPLE SEATED IN THE BLEACHERS!** Nor are they focused on any of the **OTHER EVENTS THAT ARE BEING CONTESTED** in any other part of the stadium. **No, instead their eyes are totally focused on the finish line.**

For most of my life when I have read these words of our epistle lesson today, I imagined that St. Paul had a footrace in mind; a footrace being run by human competitors, but recently I learned that there are a growing number of New Testament scholars who will tell us that what Paul probably had in mind was a chariot race! Let me explain!

The Romans had a **"circus"** in their culture too, but it was not a "circus" as you and I would think of a circus today in our American culture. The Roman circus was a **LARGE OPEN-AIR VENUE USED FOR PUBLIC EVENTS** in the ancient Roman Empire, very similar to the ancient **Greek hippodromes.** Along with theatres and amphitheatres, circuses were one of the main forms of entertainment. Circuses were venues for chariot races, horse races, and for performances commemorating important events in the history of the Roman Empire. For events that involved re-enactments of naval battles, the circus was flooded with water.

The first and greatest circus of all was the **Circus Maximus** in Rome, and here St. Paul is describing the charioteer, intent on the race, with his eyes fixed on the front, not daring to look behind lest the slightest pressure on the reins (wrapped around his body) would produce a false move and cause him to lose the race and also, quite possibly, his life!

II. BE FORGETFUL.

Then St. Paul continues: "But one thing I do, *forgetting what lies behind...*"

Most of the time, in our lives, "being forgetful" is a bad thing. Have you ever been talking to someone else and you can't remember their name to save your life? Or have you ever walked into a room and forgot why you just went in there? You knew it was to get something you needed, but now you can't even remember what it was! This kind of forgetfulness is not helpful to us and is even kind of embarrassing, isn't it?

BUT THE KIND OF FORGETFULNESS THAT ST. PAUL IS TALKING ABOUT IN OUR EPISTLE LESSON THIS MORNING IS A GOOD THING. PAUL CERTAINLY HAD THINGS IN HIS PAST HE WAS ASHAMED OF.

We learn in Acts 7 that before he became a Christian, he had given his approval to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and Paul even allowed Stephen's killers to lay their clothes at his feet while they carrying out his treacherous deed! **In ACTS 8, WE LEARN THAT PAUL, OR SAUL OF TARSUS, as he was better known by his Hebrew name in those days, was the chief persecutor of Christians, doing everything he could to destroy the Church. Realizing he could not change the past, he had to forget it and move on! And we need to do the same!**

Nevertheless Satan, our accuser, still knows that if he can get us to remember our past sins and failures, he can **do much to slow down our spiritual progress. He can do much to rob us of our joy and he can do much to take away our proper sense of victory from us!**

I once heard about a man who was invited by a friend to supper one night. They were to meet at the man's office at the end of the workday, and from there they were to go out to a restaurant for dinner together. This man said, **"When I got there I found my friend sitting behind a desk, upon which there wasn't even a single sheet of paper. It was absolute orderliness. It wasn't my desk, believe me!**

As we walked to the door, I noticed a big wastebasket, and I said, "What's that?" He said, "It's a wastebasket, one of the greatest inventions known to man."

"Why don't you put it over by your desk?" I asked.

"Oh, there's one over there too...but I have this one for a certain purpose."

Above this one, there was hung on the wall a calendar; one of those calendars that shows the date for just one day at a time. He reached up, grabbed the page for the day, and let it fall into the wastebasket. Then he closed his eyes, his lips moved, and he uttered quietly to himself, a little prayer. When they got out on the street the man asked his friend, "Bill," he said, "would you mind telling me what it is that you uttered in that little prayer?"

"Sure, I'd be happy to tell you," Bill replied. "Lord, I sure do thank you for the gift of this day. I tried to do the best I could with it. Maybe I've done some dumb things, and maybe I made some big mistakes, but Lord it's night now. You gave me this day, and now I am giving it back to you with thanks. And okay, Lord, with your help I am going to have a good time tonight and think only of the future."

Brothers and sisters this is really what it means to pray a Christian prayer! Because when God forgives our sin, He tells us that He has also forgotten it, and he invites us to do the same. One powerful benefit of the New Covenant God

told Jeremiah is that: *"I will forgive them their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34)*

III. BE FATHFUL.

The third key to attaining our goal of a life in heaven with God is to be faithful! Paul writes: *"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which GOD has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus!" (v. 14)*

The Greek word that Paul uses here that is translated "press on" is a word that was used by the ancient Greeks to describe a hound that would be in hot pursuit of a fox. The hound would relentlessly pursue the fox until he gained his prize. Likewise, St. Paul was determined to press on to relentlessly to pursue the prize of a life in heaven with God until he obtained it!

Yet, Church roll books are filled with the names of people that have "started the race," whether on foot, or in a chariot, I can't be sure; nevertheless they started the race but never finished it. They may have been baptized as infants and confirmed into the membership of the church when they were 12 years old! Or in some cases they have made their first personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ when they 12 or 13 years old and then were baptized into Christ, but regardless, eventually their commitment waned and their spiritual flame burned out!

We know that the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ offers to us human beings many powerful blessings already in this life. Saving faith in Jesus Christ may give us a great amount of "staying power," or "resiliency" in our lives, a deep sense of perseverance in our souls that can be gained by us in no other way!

Perseverance in our souls is one of the great side effects that may come to us from ingesting the Gospel!

We all know that pharmaceutical companies these days love to advertise their various new drugs available on television. The message is that if you are having such and such kinds of symptoms...then you should immediately go to your physician and ask her to prescribe to you this wonderful new medication, which seem to be a whole new way of practicing medicine in our day! To many of us it seems like it's putting the cart before the horse, or to watch the tail wagging the dog.

And yet before these pharmaceutical commercial comes to an end, there is a warning given to us to also alert us to all the possible negative side effects that this particular drug could possibly also have on our health. Certainly litigation is something that pharmaceutical companies have to live in constant fear of.

That for example the relatively new drug **CELEBREX** which is a **nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID)** used for the relief of pain, fever, swelling and tenderness caused by arthritis. But the negative side effects include **headache, abdominal pain, dyspepsia, diarrhea, nausea, insomnia, serious stomach and intestinal ulcers.**

Friends, the Gospel of Jesus Christ when it is embraced has some side effects too, but these side effects are of a much more positive and benefit nature! The side effects of the Gospel when it is allowed to dwell in us richly, is that those of us who ingest will find ourselves **gladly being gathered together under the direction of the Holy Spirit to do the very thing that you and I are doing now—to worship the Triune God, attentively, joyfully, and magnanimously!**

The side effects of believing the Gospel are to receive those wonderful gifts of the Holy Spirit found in Galatians 5:22, ***"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control!"***

But another great side effect of the Gospel is that it gives to those who genuinely believe it a high degree of **perseverance in their souls;** the kind of perseverance that St. Paul had in mind when he wrote one day that we are ***"more than conquerors through Christ who loved us!" (Romans 8:37)***

Paul had this great sense of perseverance in his own soul when he wrote to the Corinthians one day:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. So we do not lose heart! For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to things that are seen but to the things that are not seen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal!" (2 Cor. 4:8-12, 16-18)

And yet this perseverance of the soul was given its supreme expression in the sufferings and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who openly testified in the presence of his disciples, in that Upper Room of Jerusalem on that first Maundy Thursday: **"Now is my soul troubled and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for it was for this very purpose that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again!" (John 12:27-28)**

Jesus' name was glorified in his willingness to the cross for you and me, confident that on the third day he would rise victoriously from the dead once again! Jesus name is glorified right here in this place today, when he by his resurrection power invites us forward to his holy table, to receive in faith with confidence what he is offering to us—his very body that was broken into death on the cross for us, and his very blood that was shed on the cross for us for the remission of all of our sins!

Once upon a time the clockmaker made a little clock. As the clock started ticking it looked up and noticed a grandfather clock. "How old are you?" asked the little clock.

The grandfather clock explained that he was one hundred years old!

At first the little clock was really impressed but as he thought about it he became really anxious. He said to the grandfather clock, "There are two ticks (a tick and a tock) in every second, 60 seconds in one minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours in a day, and 365 days in a year and you have been ticking and tocking for 100 years. If my calculations are correct, you have ticked and tocked **105,120,000** in your life!

"I just can't bear the thought of all that! It's way too much work and far too great a burden for me to handle!"

The grandfather clock then asked the little clock "Tell me, little clock, how many ticks are you asked to take at a time?"

The little clock thought for a moment and then replied: "Now that you point it out, I am only ever asked to take one tick at a time."

"Precisely so" said the grandfather clock. "Just take one tick or one tock at a time and you will never find it too much."

The spiritual lesson is clear; in order to help us persevere we should take one day at a time or one trouble at a time.

Sometimes when I see so many of you going through all sorts of personal trials and tribulations, during which times you give me an opportunity to minister to you, I want you to know that you powerfully minister to me too, because I can easily discern that what is carrying you forward into the future day by day in extremely difficult days, is not your own limited sense of human will power, but the very power of God that raised Jesus Christ victoriously from the dead. And isn't this what St. Paul also promises to each of us in Romans 8:11: *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you!"* Amen