

Straining Forward to What's Ahead

Philippians 3:3-14

October 8, 2017

My brothers and sisters it is absolutely AMAZING how many verses there are throughout the Bible that compare some aspect of our experience of life in this world—to the experience of a great athlete who is participating in some type of sporting event!

Take the sport of “wrestling” for example. Genesis 32 – Jacob.

In Psalm 19, David is praising the LORD God Almighty – beauty of the earth and the glorious wonder of all creation. Here he compares the daily rising and the setting of the sun—to be like a strong man—a runner who completes his course.

Why even Solomon gets in on the action. Regarded to be the wisest man of the whole Old Testament era, he cautions us in Ecclesiastes, not to grow spiritually complacent or to ever take our faith for granted! Why? Because there are circumstances in this world that are beyond our control; like those 58 people who drove out of their driveways last Sunday afternoon in Las Vegas to attend an outdoor concert of country music. They never knew they wouldn't be returning to their home several hours later; they died because they became the innocent victims of a crazed gunman in a senseless massacre.

Solomon says that life is like a footrace, but the victory does not always belong to the swiftest runner or the most fleet of foot, because human beings also can be like fish in the sea that become caught, unexpectedly, in an “evil” net or like birds that get caught in a snare.

You know St. Paul must have been a real sports enthusiast. He must have had a great deal of appreciation for the OLYMPIC contests in ancient Greece. He compares the life of faith many times to various sporting events.

In I Corinthians 9, Paul asks the question: *“Do you not know that all the runners in the stadium run in the race, but that ONLY ONE OF THEM RECEIVES THE PRIZE? Run in such a way as to win the prize.*

They are running to receive a *perishable crown*, but you and I are running to receive an *imperishable crown*! And then, St. Paul, using himself as his own example, as he often does, says: *“Therefore I do not run aimlessly. Nor do I substitute my participation in a real boxing match with shadow boxing. Therefore, I pummel my body and discipline it—lest after my preaching the Gospel to countless others that I myself should become disqualified from the race!”*

It's almost as if St. Paul here is speaking to us about his own bucket list!

And you know what people mean, don't you, when they speak about having a bucket list? It's a list of all the things people still want to do before they die.

Some people maybe even in their 60s or 70s still want to learn how to speak a foreign language before they die, or maybe to learn to play a musical instrument before they die. Others want to at long last make that trip to Europe or Hawaii.

But for Paul—the number one thing was at the top of his own bucket list—was to come to the end of his life and be absolutely certain that the very moment he would close his eyes in death, would be from his perspective, the very moment that he then opens his eyes and see the glorified Christ in heaven and all of those thousands and thousands of saints, who from their labors rest.

Therefore Paul, just as King Solomon did—tells us not to grow spiritually complacent or to take our faith for granted.

Don't say, I no longer need to remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy because 40 years ago I was sitting in such and such of church, in such and such of place and "got saved."

Don't say that I no longer need to participate in worship services and Bible classes on Sunday, because 10 years ago I got confirmed in such and such a Lutheran Church in such and such a city.

Don't even say, I no longer need to receive the Lord's Supper because I believe in Jesus.

I am not saying you aren't saved or that you are destined for the Promised Land of heaven because you spoke your confirmation vows, or because you believe in Jesus—but don't grow spiritually complacent and take your faith for granted.

Jesus teaches us this same lesson repeatedly! "Strive to enter through the narrow door. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you as well. Don't be like those 5 foolish bridesmaids who let their supply of oil become completely depleted—so that when the Bridegroom entered the Wedding Hall at midnight, they were in no way prepared to meet him!"

So, what are St Paul real objectives in this passage from that beautiful little letter of his in the New Testament known as Philippians—Paul's letter of joy—that use the word "joy" 5 times and the very "to rejoice" 9 times—for a total of 14 times?

In the first 6 verses of this text, Paul finds it necessary to defend his apostleship. The Judaizers—who were telling the Gentile men that in addition to their being baptized—they also needed to become circumcised to really be Christian and welcomed into the fellowship of our Savior's Church.

Perhaps there were some who were suggesting that Paul wasn't even a real Jewish man at all; that he had been a Gentile proselyte (convert) to the Christian faith; but Paul refutes all of this, substantiating his claim that he was circumcised on the 8th day; of the people of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, one blameless under the law!

In the first four verses 3-6 Paul is defending his apostleship.

But in the next 8 verses he was telling us how his life with Christ was far greater than it had ever been before without Christ.

Some of you I am sure are familiar with an incident that took place in an NFL football game back in 1964, when a lineman for the Minnesota Vikings was playing in a football game against the San Francisco 49ers. This lineman, named Jim Marshall, retrieved the ball after a fumble by the San Francisco 49ers. He picked up the football and the only thing he could see was broad daylight ahead of him. He had visions of a touchdown dancing in his head.

Even more wonderfully, he couldn't see any of those red jerseys of the opposing team anywhere on the field! So, having picked up the ball he runs with it...even though he sees some of his own teammates waving their arms along the sidelines. He was still be stoked by the loud cries coming at him from the bleachers. He runs 60 yards and is so elated by the touchdown he has made that he takes that football and hurls it as high as he can into the stands of all the spectators.

He was feeling so good—until a football player from the opposing team, one of the 49ers in his red jersey comes over and gives him a hug. Now he realizes what he did. He had run the ball into the wrong end zone; giving the opposing team 2 points.

Everyone in the stadium that day knew that he was running the wrong way, except for Jim Marshall.

Paul who had always sought to justify himself by his keeping of God's law, discovers by the grace of God—one day—through the conversion experience he had had on the Road to Damascus—that he had been running in the wrong way and running in the wrong direction!

When he sought to justify himself in God's eyes by his attempts to perfectly keep the law of God, he found that that effort resulted in his constantly trying to build himself up---but putting other people down! Such an attempted did far more to exclude other people, than it did to include other people.

He spent far too much time—bragging on himself! But once Jesus had caught Paul on that road to Damascus—his whole life was changed. Now rather than his bragging on himself, he was now boasting of Christ instead!

He even says in Galatians, let him who boasts, boast of the Lord and FAR BE IT FROM ME TO GLORY EXCEPT IN THE CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, BY WHICH I HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED TO THE WORLD AND THE WORLD TO ME.

ANCIENT LEGEND, 490 BC GIGANTIC PERSIAN ARMY WAS SCHEDULED TO INVADE GREECE AT THE COASTAL TOWN OF MARATHON ALONG THE AGEAN SEA. They did but the unbelievable most and highly unexpected thing took place...the vastly outnumbered Athenian Army defeated those Persians.

Now the message had to be brought to Athens, and the man chosen for that task to be the messenger, who was also a runner, was Pheidippides. Who ran the whole distance—25 miles—from Marathon to Athens...without stopping once along the way; not even for a drink of water to quench his thirst.

So he arrived in Athens, when to the sacred assembly where those in charge of government were convened together. He went in that room completely EXHAUSTED, DEHYDRATED, OUT OF BREATH, PANTING AND SATURATED IN HIS OWN SWEAT AND SHOUTED OUT: REJOICE, WE CONQUERED!

And then immediately he collapsed, fell to the floor and died instantly.

Twenty-six centuries later the great English poet, Robert Browning conjectured that Pheidippides died with a gigantic smile on his face. He did not from the sheer physical exhaustion of the run, but from the sheer bliss and joy brought to him by the message he was sharing.

The Greek word for the “Gospel,” or “Good News,” is *euangelion*, a word that was used in the 1st Century Greek work to describe this kind of MAGNIFICENT VICTORY.

You know, there is good news and then there is good news.

The news that boneless, skinless chicken breast are on sale down at Kroger for \$1.99 a pound. That is good news! But not nearly as good of news as when the message rang out in the North and the South in 1865 that the Civil War was over.

The Gospel sends people running to tell others. The women who heard the angels’ proclamation that first Easter morning: “He is not here! He’s risen as he said!” went running to tell the men folk disciples. That news sent Peter and John running down to the empty tomb to inspect it for themselves.

There they saw the grave clothes of Jesus all folded up and lying one place and the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head, all folded up, and laying a short distance away!

May we adopting the attitude of the Apostle Paul: “One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus!” Amen