

Press On

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[0 : 0 0] Now one of the things I didn't enjoy at school, I don't know if you did this when you were at school, was the cross country. When it came to January, the pitches were frozen, too hard to play rugby or football, and everyone knew that it was six weeks of cross country.

Now it was one of those things that we did at secondary school, if you've not gone to secondary school yet and you're still wondering what cross country is, it's where the games teach will make you run, well for us, outside of the school, outside of the school sort of yard, on an up and down, around the country, in freezing cold, and the aim was to try and get a better time every week.

Some kids loved it, I hated it, and many others did as well, cross country. Now I don't know if that was a common thing that you did, but with that, in our school, the whole year did it together.

And so, you've got a whole range of both abilities and attitudes in together. You'd get the athletic sort, the tad, the athletes, who set off like a rocket, right down to those who maybe found it a bit of a problem, weren't as fit and would walk around.

And then you'd get those in the middle, those who couldn't do it, but were too cool and pretended not to care. Now, I don't know what kind of a cross country runner, either, if you did that, I don't know what kind of a cross country runner you were. Getting to the end, for me, was an achievement in itself. I just remember the palpable relief of every week just getting it out of the way. When you were in the middle of the cross country, your attitude and what you thought about would determine your ability to keep going, or whether you were going to give up and just walk. Going up the hills, your calves would be burning, then there'd be doubts. It's cold, I'm wet, I'm in pain, I'm knackered, I can't be bothered.

[2 : 0 1] But if you were thinking of the finish line, crossing, maybe getting a better time than last week, having that razor focus, that attitude would help you to press on and to keep going.

In our reading from the Bible that we have today, Paul is writing to the Philippian church, and he's writing not about the cross country race, but he's writing about his spiritual life.

He's writing about how he keeps going, why he presses on as a follower of Jesus, how he keeps motivated to reach his spiritual finish line.

The verses that we're highlighting this morning are from verses 12 onwards. We looked at verses 1 to 11, last time you might remember. And it was in last time, just as a quick reminder, it's quite a while since we looked at that passage. It was in the verses just before that Paul outlined what his finish line is. Just look at chapter 3, verse 10. The this is what Paul says he wants. Look with me, verse 10. I want to know Christ. Yes, to know the power of his resurrection, participation in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead. This is Paul's spiritual finish line. Knowing Jesus and knowing him perfectly. And finally, being raised to complete, perfect, new life.

Having that same body that Jesus has. When Paul is writing this, he isn't there yet. Look, verse 12, that's what he means. He says, not that I've already obtained this. He means he hasn't reached his finish line yet. He's in the race. He does know Jesus, but only in part, not fully. He does have new life, but it's not yet complete. He views his life as a race that is halfway through. This side of heaven, for followers of Jesus, our experience is like Paul's. Our life is like one big race. We've been changed by Jesus and we know him. But the finish line is when we meet Jesus in person, face to face, and our bodies are to be raised like his. And so this is the finish line of Paul's life. To have that, that is his life's goal. He doesn't have it, but he wants it to make sure that his life is about reaching it. Look at the language he uses about his life now. End of verse 12, but I press on,

[4 : 43] I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. He wants to take it desperately. Desperately wants to know Jesus. Desperately wants to know more of Christ.

Wants to be where Jesus is. Why? Because Jesus took hold. End of verse 13, look with me what he says. One thing I do. One thing. Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead. Press on towards the goal. That's towards his finish line. When, just recently, I don't know if you've been watching the Olympics. I didn't realise actually earlier on this week that this week was the weekend of the 100 metre sprint. We had the women's final last night and the men's final tonight. We love, I love watching the sprinting. But you watch as the sprinters, as they get within touching distance of the finish line. And maybe you did get this in a school cross country if it was close, if there was a sprint finish. But as the sprinters, as they get towards that finish line, they lean forwards, don't they? They lean forwards with every part of their body straining to cross the finish line. To win the prize. They're not looking behind. They're not thinking about the beginning. Everything is about them crossing that finish line. What's gone before has gone. This is Paul. His primary focus is what lies ahead. He's pressing, moving rapidly and decisively, straining, extending every part of himself so he can get to that goal. The goal, verse 14. I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. The call to Paul first came when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Jesus called Paul to belong to him. That was when Jesus took hold of Paul.

It was a call that would end up in him going heavenly. It would end up at the finish line. When Paul heard that call on the road to Damascus, that was like the starting goal of Paul's spiritual race. When he became a follower, what do you see at the beginning of the race? On your marks, bang! And the rest of his life, running towards the finish line. The prize of meeting Jesus, knowing him, becoming like him in his death and resurrection. Can I ask you today, have you heard the call of Jesus? Has the gun sounded? On your marks, bang! You're called towards the finish line. Are you now running the race towards the spiritual finish line of knowing Jesus fully and completely? Are you secure in knowing you will reach it? Can I just tell you that once you've received that upward call, once you've heard that goal go off, the call of Jesus, on your marks, bang! Our finish line is the same. And every day of your Christian life is straining, leaning in, pressing on to the same goal, the same goal, the same prize for which God has called you. He's calling you. He's pulling you along that race, heavenwards. True and real, living with Jesus face to face. That is what we're aiming for. That is what we're pressing on towards, knowing you with nothing getting in the way. Pressing on to the prize that you know one day you'll get there. What does Paul say about this? He says that to think that way is actual. That is what spiritual maturity is. Spiritual maturity is thinking this way about your life. Look with me, he writes, verse 15, all of us then who are mature should take a view of such things.

And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. My suggestion is this. My suggestion is to take this idea and make it the goal of your life. Make it the goal of every day. Press on towards that goal. Have the finish line in view and let the finish line, meeting Jesus, becoming like him perfectly, determine how you live today.

How you make good decisions about your life. That is true spiritual maturity. That is true spiritual maturity. Because you could think, well, I understand that idea. And we're going to come back to that there. You could think, I understand that idea, but I'm not quite sure what it means day to day. Which is where we're going to tonight. Where we're going next is, Paul gives examples of people who run towards the finish line and those who don't. Those who run towards and those who don't.

[9 : 42] We're going to start with those who don't. The enemies of Christ. I mentioned when you were doing cross country, there were those who could have done it, but didn't bother. Who didn't even start. Or there were those who just walked around, but they could have gotten a decent time.

There was even kids when we were doing it in my school who decided halfway could just run home. Or even jump on the bus back to school or try to get a crafty smoke. You see, what they did is, well, they avoided the race. More often than not, it was because the finish line didn't matter. If you run in the wrong direction, you won't reach the finish line.

But it's obvious, isn't it? Paul writes to the church about enemies of Christ. Enemies of Jesus that don't have this same spiritual finish line of resurrection as they go. Look with me from verse 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. Their destiny is destruction. Their God is their stomach and their glory is their shame. Now, mind you sit on earth with things. There is a bit of debate as to who the enemies are. As far as I can see, these are not the same enemies that I've talked about in verse 2. In verse 2, he calls these enemies dogs, evildoers, mutilators of the flesh. There, he's talking about fanatical Jews, if you can remember from last time. Here, in verse 18, it's slightly different. There's a lot of compassion for these enemies. Look, he says, now they tell you again, even with tears. Which I take to mean he has a lot, he had at one point, or he still does, have a lot of affection and love towards this group of people. Which I take to mean it is professing belief, professing people who say they follow Jesus, but whose pursuit, whose race doesn't match his own. Their goal, their purpose is very different. Their finish line is not resurrection, but achieving the things of this life. And you see what this looks like. Firstly, their God is their stomach.

It doesn't mean that they love their food, but that they're navel-gators. It means their only concern is to look at themselves and think about what they need. Concerned about how the world affects them. That's the opposite of looking out for one another in humility, which is what Philippines is all about. You see, secondly, their glory is in their shame.

The very things that are shameful in God's eyes, sin, getting, you know, angry and all these different types of sins. They've got used to, abusing the freedom they have. They're now glory in doing it. Take great joy in committing sin and assuming that God's free gift of grace will still come up. And thirdly, their mind is set on earth. It is a truncated vision of life, a small vision. Looking to the things of this world to satisfy in comparison to Jesus, who offers so much more. It is making what we can achieve in this life the number one thing.

[13 : 12] It is a life that on the surface might look and sound spiritual, but it looks no different to how the world looks. And it is dangerous. It's very dangerous because what do we see?

Their destiny is not a finish thing. Their destiny is not heavenly. It is not heavenly. Their destiny is destruction. Their enemies are the close.

Paul is describing an attitude where people want Jesus as saviour. They want the righteous standing, the forgiveness, but they don't want him as law. And so abuse the freedom that comes from the gospel to do whatever they want. As a get out cause. I know Jesus doesn't want me to live like this, but it's okay because I'm forgiven. We can do whatever we want now, can't we? That is not a way to treat the cross of Christ. It's drawn from Paul.

Paul is saying to live like that is an enemy of the cross. It's not what Christ died for. He set you free from the power of sin. So you can say no to it. Not presume on his grace.

Not so that you walk like an enemy. We can easily be ensnared by that. We can easily be ensnared. We might know the Christians who suggest that. When you sin, it's tempting to think, but everybody does that. That's alright, isn't it? God still forgives us. It's tempting to think that earthly pleasures are the finish line or when we achieve a certain status of comfortable life. Let me just tell you, Christ did not die and purchase your freedom so that it can be abused. If you sin and think, oh well, it doesn't matter anymore. I've got the stamp of approval already. I can do whatever I want. Can I just state really clearly, be very careful. Be very careful.

[15 : 03] God will not let his offer of forgiveness be abused and he won't be abused. Be very careful. So if that's not how we're supposed to run, how are we supposed to run? Paul doesn't want that for the Philippian church. He wants them to run towards the finish line like it. Verse 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. If you want to get better at sport, if you want to get better at sprinting or running the cross country, it's a good idea, isn't it? It's a good idea to watch those who do it best. Athletes create an environment to succeed.

They eat the right foods, make sure they get enough sleep, look after their body. They stay fit and train to make sure they're in the best condition to finish the race. They keep their eye on the finish line. They don't worry about anyone else but themselves when they race.

they actually believe that they belong on the podium. They walk to the start line with great confidence that that is where they're going to get to. You see, Paul and others that he talks about, they've run the race. They've run the race before us. They are our models, they are our examples, and we should see how they watch, how they ran, on how they lived and what they do. Paul has two things to say about what he focuses on. The first one comes in verse 20. He says, our citizenship is in heaven. When Paul looks at the finish line, he says to himself, I belong on the other side of it. Because Jesus has taken hold of me, because I'm born of heaven, because my home is heaven, because the citizen on the spiritual passport, the place of origin says heaven is no longer on this earth. Like the athlete that feels at home on the podium. Paul knows that his home, his podium, his reward, is being with Christ, because that's where he belongs. That is where he belongs. So that's the first thing. Our citizenship is in heaven. His home is on the podium. The second thing that he says is that our Saviour comes from the place we belong. The Lord Jesus, verse 21, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, and from that place will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his. When Jesus returns, when the Saviour comes from the place where we actually belong, Paul's lowly physical body will become like that of Jesus Christ's resurrected. When the running of the race of life is hard, when your spiritual calves burn and you feel like giving up, remember Jesus will change your boy to be like his. Now, it takes hard graft, it takes spiritual discipline and training to keep our minds on the things that Paul thinks about. At times it doesn't feel like we belong to heaven on this earth. It feels distant and we don't know what it's like. The things of this earth we can taste, touch, smell and experience. It can feel more real and attractive. Even that relief of having a body like Jesus can seem a long way off, whilst we deal with the things we have here and now.

We suffer, we get ill, have issues with mental health. We experience grief, heartache and disappointment. We make mistakes and have regrets about sins and have caused pain to ourselves and to others.

We're impatient for change and it can be tempting to look for quick fixes. But we must look to Paul and we must stand firm. He writes, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way. In this way. Stand firm dear friends. So can I suggest to you again, stand firm. Keep going. Keep doing what you're doing. Look to Paul and not just Paul, but other Christians, maybe who have been running the race longer than we have. Christians that you know, take note of how they run, how they press on and keep going to the finish line, how they fix their eyes on the finish line and copy them, imitate them. Because you belong on the podium with Christ. That is where your home is. You belong there.

[19 : 46] And if you've heard the call of Jesus on your marks, bam, your finish line is secure. That's where you're headed and Jesus is pulling you there. When you cross that finish line, you won't be lowly anymore. But raised up.

Jesus is waiting for you there. He's cheering you on and he's running the race with you. We're all in this together cheering each other. Supporting one another to get to the end.

And let's just remember, as you run, as you really run, it's not actually Paul that you're copying. It's not actually other believers that you're copying. It is Christ in Paul that you're copying.

The hope of glory. Jesus is the one who has run the race first. In his life, in his death, in his resurrection. He is the one who Paul imitates and who we imitate. Keep going the race. Keep going.

Knowing that the finish line, you will meet Jesus, you will know him and you will be like him. Let's pray. Almighty God, what joy we have in knowing that our future is secure.

[20 : 57] That if we have heard the call from you on us, we've heard you call us by name. And we know that our race has started. We know that you're pulling us along to the finish line that is resurrection.

That is knowing you, meeting you and being with you in that very true and proper sense. We pray that you would help us to keep moving. Help us to press on for that prize of meeting you.

Knowing that our home is on the podium with Jesus. We know that we need your help. We know that we need the help of one another. We know we need to hear you day by day in the word, cheering us on, pulling us towards yourself.

We thank you that this is our great hope. This is the hope we have in Jesus. That one day we will meet you and be like you. Bless us and we pray that we would live in light of that.

That is true. That our decisions and the way that we live would be because we have meditated and thought of where our future is. And so we thank you and pray for your blessing. In Jesus name. Amen.