

January 29 Living Looking Forwards Philippians 3:7-14

I will begin this morning by asking the question:

What is the driving force of your life?

In your own mind how would you answer that question?

Or to put it another way – What is it that directs your day TODAY along with your dreams for tomorrow and even your vision for the next ten years of your life or to the very end of your life on earth?

Essentially there are only two principal core things to choose between with the driving force of your life and what are they? The answer is either me, or God. Your personal goals, dreams and vision for the future will inevitably always stem from one of the two.

In our bible passage today the apostle Paul teaches and firmly directs us to live our Christian life with not a 'Me' but a God inspired driving force with a specific forward looking focus.

Each day from the time you wake up you are called to live with God as your driving force, not harken back to yesterday, but to choose to get up and actively live that day as though you are in a race and you are once again at the start line looking down the track or visualising the day's course, living under the grace and in the strength and power of God doing this with the finish line in mind, and a restful sleep after such a day Living for the Lord.

Paul when he wrote this letter to the Philippians was living under house arrest in Rome in a rented home that he had to pay for, the money for which, came largely from the support of the Church in Philippi. The city of Philippi was a prosperous Roman Colony in Macedonia, Greece. And it appears the Christians there were generous, not short of a bob or two, and supportive of Paul's ministry financially as well as prayfully.

Paul's ministry while under house arrest involved writing the odd letter to address the specific circumstances of a church with words that encouraged, taught, directed and even admonished the church with regards to the issues and situations they faced. Paul's imprisonment didn't serve in any way to dampen his enthusiasm, rob his joy, or prevent the spread of the gospel message. Firstly because it actually emboldened others to get out and share the message whether from pure or impure motives and secondly because of this.

Daily Paul awoke to the changing of his Roman guard. Paul was under house arrest because of his stand for the gospel; he was in chains for Christ, not a real crime as all his guards would soon become aware of. The Roman soldiers who guarded him were from the Emperor's palace and came one at a time him one from the Praetorian Regiment, the finest in the Roman army, numbering many thousand, many of whom Paul would have met during his two year imprisonment. Each day he awoke then, he began his race, living looking forwards, not backwards in self-pity, because he had been blessed with the God given opportunity to get to know better, love and share the gospel and teach anyone who visited him and of course the Roman soldier guarding him at the time. He was going to finish his race for the day taking the opportunity to make the gospel known with as many as he could in order to see them over the line to win the prize for which God had called him heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Paul when he wrote to all God's people in the church at Philippi did so to provide them with what is basically a missionary report on the progress of his work to some of his most avid supporters at the time and also to promote a vigorous type of Christian living in the face of the Judaizers (Jewish legalists in the church who advocated that all Christian believers should follow Jewish practices) and antinomians (who were liberals who threw off all moral restraints) who were among them in the church and seeking to pull them backwards or sideways in their Christian faith and outlook on life, distracting them away from their true spiritual goal. Paul wrote to them to tell them to be just as single-minded and determined in their life and faith as he was in Christ. While Paul had this one over ridding ambition and focused goal for his life he certainly did not neglect other important areas of his life.

From the time of Paul's conversion when Christ the Lord appeared to him on that dusty road to Damascus he had reassessed his goals in life, which were headed up by a desire to know Christ more fully. His whole life became the pursuit of that direction, but he is yet to reach his final goal.

So Paul knows that he must continue daily to pursue the purposes Christ had chosen for him, as must the Philippians, where spiritual progress is the priority that all Christians must follow. Just how were the Philippians to follow Christ and reach the goal then?

Paul had probably attended the Olympic games himself providing inspiration from the culture of the day to write with athletic imagery using the metaphor of Christian Life being like that of a "foot race". And in this race Paul's focus is Christ's goal for him to "press on toward the goal". This in the Greek refers to one who in a race runs swiftly to reach the goal and that goal is the distant mark of the finish line you have in view while moving towards it. For the Christian it is to be their all-consuming passion to reach this goal.

An important part of reaching his goal in this foot race of the Christian life, Paul tells his brothers and sisters in Christ in Philippi, involves "forgetting what is behind" v13 and relentlessly centering his energies and interests on the course that is in front of him.

Now "forgetting" did not mean obliterating or losing all memory of his sinful past but instead he was leaving it behind by making a conscious decision to refuse to let it suck up all his attention and get in the way of his progress. He wasn't going to let Jewish heritage or his previous Christian attainments obstruct him from running the race because he chose to leave the past in the past as done and settled.

The Philippians would have had to ask themselves, have I done that? Human nature as it is means that certain individuals will hold on to things that suck the life out of them grossly disturbing them because of the pain, trauma, suffering, bitterness, resentment and unforgiveness that is associated with an event or circumstances of their past. There is a need for Jesus to enter your life and take you back there and heal, forgive and deliver you from the power of past memories, giving you new life and wisdom to live for today that enables you to press on because the matter has been settled in your heart and mind. Or, you find a very good counsellor or therapist who will take you back to the past and assist you to revisit, relinquish and relearn the truth of those circumstances as an adult who is now in Christ. When the Spirit of Truth releases you from the bondage of the past because you have made the conscious decision to live and believe that the past has no hold, no power over you, then it is that you can now forget what is behind and stretch out and reach forward unimpeded, straining toward the goal that is ahead.

You are free then to press onward, Paul tells the Philippians, to the goal in order to win the “prize” v14. The winner of the Greek races received a wreath of leaves and sometimes money as well.

The Christian’s prize that Paul is talking about is the award of everlasting glory that a Christian receives at the end of their earthly life in heaven. The “calling heavenward” is the picture of the summons of the winner of the race to approach the elevated stand of the judge and receive the prize. When the goal is reached according to Paul the prize would be fully his as God calls him “heavenward in Christ Jesus”. Paul’s ultimate aspirations are not found in this life but in heaven because Christ is there! And when the goal was reached the prize would be his!

His destiny had him focused, looking only forward to the future not dwelling on the past, be it success or failure. Can you now begin to hear Paul today telling you that we each like him are to ‘Forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead. Keep pressing on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus?’

Life Application:

Using the image of the athlete Paul has taught us how we, like the Philippians, should both view and live the Christian life. And that life is one of absolute determination and single-mindedness, which requires believers just as athletes to train well and then remain extremely focused because in this race there is a very certain destination to be reached with a specific ‘prize’ to be awarded.

In reality, it can be hard to reconcile our modern faith with Paul's faith. Paul found something in Jesus that emboldened him to forfeit his previously ‘Me’ normal life. Paul's faith is made up of things forfeited. How do we know that? That is what he said, "I have lost all things...that I may gain Christ." (v.8) What did he forfeit? Plenty! ‘Me’ as in Title and reputation, professional friends and community standing. Steady income and a comfortable bed on many a night. But, more importantly, he forfeited designing his own life. He gave up careerism for calling. He gave up the fantasy of independence for the truth of interdependence. He allowed what was in his head about Christ to enter his blood stream, his calendar, and his money purse. He took on Jesus' spirituality of simplicity. He became a prisoner in Rome by virtue of following Jesus Christ obediently and passionately sharing the good news.

So, What shall we do?

Paul said it plainly, Live looking forwards, in other words "...press on toward the goal...." (Phil. 3.13) Paul had a goal-oriented faith. And so must we. That goal had three parts all contained in v13.

Step one: "Forget what lies behind."

Jesus has redeemed the past and bought us a future with his love. So, do not get stuck in the past. You are free. Jesus himself said, "Those whom the Son has set free are free indeed." (John 8.36)

Step two: "Strain forward. Strain toward what is ahead"

Moving forward with Jesus takes some work. You will have to confront any present fear of what lies ahead. Don't worry about this because Christianity is for the spiritually athletic. It stretches us exactly how we need to be stretched. You can trust the process.

Step three: "...press on toward the goal of the heavenly calling."

Followers of Jesus are not obsessed with being good people like so many people are nowadays. No, our goal is God, not good. We cannot make ourselves good let alone perfect. The only good there is comes from pursuing God, so we press on toward our heavenly calling each and every day.

Conclusion:

As citizens of heaven, you and I have been called to release heaven wherever we are. And you and I have been given the capacity to release heaven wherever we find ourselves. And more heaven gets released every day on earth when you and I pray and then press on with Jesus. Forgiveness is from heaven. So is love, peace, joy, generosity, and kindness. We are pressing on toward that at home and at work, in the church and wherever else we find ourselves. We achieve this when we forget what is behind and strain toward to what is ahead.

So the challenge remains:

Will you today commit yourself to press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus?