

**“Run the race in 2024!”****Philippians 3:1-4:1****December 31st 2023****Never Give Up!**

Last Tuesday evening, I sat down to watch Manchester United play Aston Villa. Although they were down 2-0 at half time, they made a remarkable come back to win 3-2.

That decisive victory reminded me of something Sir Alex Ferguson consistently said over the years: one of the pillars of his managerial philosophy was “Never give up,” “never give in,” “keep on going.” If Ten Hag’s team had given up at half-time, discouraged because they were 2 goals down, they would not have won the game.

And what’s true in sport is also true in the Christian life, we must never give up, until we are called home or Jesus returns in glory. At the dawn of a New Year, that’s our simple message and our sincere prayer, “Let every believer run the race in 2024! May none give up, may all press on!”

And to learn how to run the race in 2024 we turn to the apostle Paul, to his letter to the Philippians chapter 3:13-14, where he tells us how he runs his race, “One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13-14)

Perhaps I am speaking to a young believer who has just begun the race— you did not realise how difficult the Christian life would be—and you need to hear the message “don’t give up, keep running!”

Perhaps you are a weary Christian, discouraged and downhearted by the trials of the last year. Tempted to give up. This word is for you.

Perhaps you feel you are running the race well—you also need to hear this word, because complacency is a danger in the Christian race

Every believer, young, weary or advanced needs to hear today's word, "One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 3:13-14

Very simply, then, how can we run the race in 2024? Paul gives us three strategies:

### (1) Forget the Past

We will never be successful Christian athletes if we keep looking over our shoulders - remembering lost races, poor seasons, past mistakes. We must learn to forget the past. "One thing I do, forgetting what is behind.."

**1) We must forget past sins.** Satan loves to press the rewind button and fill our minds with former transgressions! "What a poor Christian you have been!" When he does that we must recall the promises of Scripture, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful; and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12) "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)

**2) We must also forget past mistakes.** I'm not thinking here about sins but about errors of judgement. David Livingstone explored and mapped out Africa to make the work of missionaries following after him easier. He made friends of all the people he met along the way. But one day he learnt that some slave traders were using his name. They would enter a village saying they were friends of David Livingstone, and having won trust in that way, they turned against the people and forced them into slavery. Livingstone was absolutely devastated. He had failed to foresee this abuse of his name. He could have given up. But he didn't. He learnt from the mistake and in the future warned everyone he met against these wicked gangs. And here's the point: he kept on going! We will all make mistakes. The Christian who hasn't made a mistake probably hasn't made anything. I once heard an entrepreneur say that he had learned everything from his mistakes and nothing from his successes. We must learn from mistakes but never allow them hold us back.

**3) We must forget bad Experiences such as** disappointments, hardships, discouragements, insults, slander. It's all too easy to get lost in some dark historic tunnel and never quite come out the other side. Held back by some event that took place in 1983, 1998, 2005, 2013, 2023, or whatever. We've not worked through it with God's grace and we've allowed it to define us and to slow us down.

### SLIDE 5 (The trials of Paul)

#### Illustration—Paul

Paul suffered many disappointments and troubles in his ministry: he was beaten and whipped many times, he was stoned, he was deserted by colleagues, betrayed by false brothers, he was shipwrecked and imprisoned: but he didn't allow these painful experiences to slow him down: he learnt to put them behind him; and so must we.

#### Summary

Are you with me brothers and sisters? If we're going to run the race in 2024, we've got to put lots of things behind us: sins, mistakes, painful experiences....

...and more! Sportsmen and sportswomen must not only **forget the bad**, they must also **forget the good**. If an athlete fills his or her mind with past successes, the medals, the prizes, complacency will slow them down.

**4) We must forget achievements and advantages.** Captain Roy Keane said that after his team had won the treble and then promptly stopped winning anything, the real cause was complacency, "the rot had set in at Old Trafford that memorable night when we claimed the treble." Players started saying things like they didn't care if they didn't win another title: "Start thinking like that and you won't win another trophy," thought Keane. "Success was breeding complacency. Too many people round the club were still intoxicated by the treble."

Perhaps God has been pleased to use you in his kingdom in 2023, perhaps you have grown in faith or service or knowledge. Don't allow those past successes to dull your spiritual passion today. And what about those of us who were brought up with significant spiritual advantages? Brought up in a Christian home, a missionary home, a pastor's home, a church leader's home? We must not allow past advantages to lull us into a false sense of present spiritual security!

No-one had a greater spiritual heritage than the apostle Paul, but he knew it could hold him back. Listen to him in verses 4 to 8.

Are you with me? If we are going to run the Christian race successfully in 2024, we are going to have to do a lot of forgetting! We must forget past sins, past mistakes; bad experiences, past achievements and past advantages.

Paul's second strategy for winning the race in 2024 is to focus on the goal.

## (2) Focus on the Goal

“Forgetting what is behind and straining towards *what is ahead...*”

Paul is like the runner whose eyes are fixed on what lies ahead of him, instead of what lies behind him. A runner's attention is on the tape, the prize, the reward! What are those future things? What does he say?

**1. Fulfilling God's plans for our lives.** Verse 12, Paul wants to press on to “*take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me..*” When Christ first took hold of Paul, back there, Damascus Road it was for a purpose. In his case it was to become apostle to the Gentiles, World Missionary. Paul wants to fulfil God's calling on his life.

You and I have also been called to good works, “We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Eph 2:10). Let each one of us press on to discover and to fulfil God's calling upon our lives.

**2. Knowing Jesus Christ more.** Another thing in Paul's sights is knowing Jesus Christ better, “*the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...*” (v.7) What does knowing Christ more mean? Does it just mean knowing more facts about him? No! It means becoming more like Christ in both in his power and in his sufferings, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings becoming like him in his death...”(v.10)

We all want the first one, power to be more effective in ministry and godliness, but do we all want the second one, suffering? Yet suffering is part of the Christian life. “For it

has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” (1:29) “If any man would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)

To know Christ means following him in his suffering: denying what we want for the sake of others, putting to death the sins of our old nature, being prepared to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

Perhaps someone here has grown in suffering over the last year, and this morning, for the very first time, you realise that your growth in suffering has in fact been growth as a believer!

What else does athlete Paul have his sights on?

### **3. Looking forward to heaven.**

Attaining “the resurrection from the dead” in v.11 “winning the prize for which Christ has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus”, v.14 “having his citizenship in heaven,” v.20, “waiting for a Saviour “who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (v.21) For Paul, the end of the Christian race, the prize, the golden medal is heaven itself.

#### **(3) Run the race with zeal!**

Run seriously, “straining towards what is ahead.” “I press on.” I’ll never forget reading how the Jamaican-born British sprinter Linford Christie once described his total concentration on the race track, “In the 100m I don’t breathe at all. I give it everything right from the B in Bang. I can’t tell you anything about the reaction of the crowd. You don’t hear the noise when you’re running, It’s like being in a trance. If you hear anything you are not concentrating.”

How serious are you and I about running the race in 2024? Serious about prayer, serious about home groups, serious about Sunday worship, serious about godliness, serious about forgiving others, serious about our giving, serious about serving.

In the second chapter of this letter Paul wrote, *“Therefore my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but how much more in my absence—*

*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (2:12-13)*

Such encouraging words! You put in the effort, you take the Christian life seriously, “fear and trembling,” and be encouraged that as you do that, you will experience God’s power helping you to do that! You hoist up the sail, you do that, and as you do, you’ll discover a divine breeze will appear from heaven to drive you along!

## Conclusion

A new year lies ahead of us all!

Not everyone in this room, I predict with sorrow, will be running the race in one year’s time. How can you say that, I hear someone protest? Well there is the parable of the sower, only one in four of the soils bore fruit. There are the crowds that deserted Jesus in John 6. There is the example of Judas and there is Demas who loved this present world and deserted Paul, (2 Timothy 4:10).

If you and I are to run the race successfully this year then;

- We must forget the past, our past sins, our past mistakes, our past successes, our past advantages
- We must focus on the goal, fulfilling the calling of God on our lives, knowing Christ more and looking forward to heaven
- And then we must run with God-given wholehearted zeal

“One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 3:13-14

And if we have not yet started the race then hear the starting gun today! Jesus is calling you, “come follow me.” What stops you from following him? Begin the race today, and if you don’t know how, ask someone to help you; and if you do start, tell someone! May the Lord bless these words to our hearts. Amen