

Pressing on to the Goal

Philippians 3:10-14

Hebrews 12:1-3

In last week's message we considered the parable of the net. The focus was on the end of the age and the separation of the wicked from the righteous. From the Lord's perspective, everyone in the world falls into one of two camps, those who know the Lord and those who are estranged from Him. Some are on the narrow way that leads to eternal life, while others are on the broad path that leads to destruction.

The Spirit of the Lord is working in exciting ways in unexpected places. At a recent pastor's meeting here in Victoria, John Peterson shared how the "red light" district in Amsterdam is shrinking while the number of evangelical churches is rapidly expanding. Pimps and prostitutes are turning to the Lord in remarkable numbers. A God-fearing Jew is the mayor, and he is collaborating with the churches to turn the tide. Amsterdam is by no means the only place where the Spirit of the Lord is bringing new life to dead situations. Story after story could be told of what God is doing in China, India, Africa and elsewhere.

What is tragic, however, is that while good news stories are happening around the world, there has also been a gradual "falling away" in our own country. Too many who used to profess faith in Christ have abandoned the Faith. They have taken their eyes off the Lord and are now focused elsewhere. They have lost sight of the finish line and dropped out of the race. What a tragedy it is when a professed believer falls away for lack of vision because they are no longer focused on the Person who is the goal and prize of life! How important it is for us to have the kind of vision, focus, and determination of which Paul speaks in our text.

It was a fog-shrouded morning, July 4, 1952, when a young woman named Florence Chadwick waded into the water off Catalina Island. She intended to swim the channel from the island to the California coast. Long-distance swimming was not new to her; she had been the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions.

The water was numbing cold on that day off Catalina Island. The fog was so thick she could hardly see the boats in her party. Several times sharks had to be driven away with rifle fire. She swam for more than fifteen hours before she finally asked to be taken out of the water. Her trainer tried to encourage her to swim on. They were so close to land, so close to the goal! But when Florence looked, all she could see was fog. So she quit – only half a mile from her goal.

Later she said, "I'm not excusing myself, but if I could only have seen the land, I might have made it." It wasn't cold, fear, or exhaustion that caused Florence Chadwick to fail. It was the fog! Her vision was clouded and she could not see.

Many people fail in life, not because they are afraid or because of peer pressure, but because they have lost sight of the goal. They are in a spiritual fog! Maybe that's why the writer to the Hebrews warns, "***Let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish*** (NLT)." Christ is the Author, the Originator of our faith, and He is also the Perfector of it. A life focused on Jesus is a life that will finish the race and end in victory.

Two months after her failure, Florence Chadwick walked off the same beach into the same channel and swam the distance, setting a new speed record. This time there was no fog and she could see the land. As she focused on her goal and could see it getting closer, she persevered and made it all the way.

It seems to me that this describes Paul. There is no hint whatsoever that he is in a spiritual fog as he runs the race of life. Listen to him:

“I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: forgetting the past, and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling me up to heaven (NLT).”

That’s the secret to a good finish. Paul wasn’t looking fearfully or fitfully at his circumstances. Nor was he focused on what the world has to offer. His spiritual eyes were riveted on Christ, whom Paul considered the prize of life and life’s ultimate goal. Paul’s eyes were fixed on the shores of eternity and no spiritual fog or sharks were going to get in his way.

Here’s another case in point. On March 6, 1987, Eamon Coughlan, the Irish world record holder in the 1500 meters, was running in a qualifying heat at the World Indoor Track Championships in Indianapolis. With two and a half laps to go, he was tripped. He fell, but he got up and with great effort managed to catch the leaders. Then with only twenty meters left in the race, he was in third place, good enough to qualify for the finals. That’s when Coughlan looked over his shoulder to the inside, and seeing no one, he let up. He didn’t see another runner, charging hard on the outside, and he was passed one meter before the finish line. He was eliminated from the finals! Coughlan’s heroic comeback effort was rendered worthless because he took his eyes off the finish line. He lost his focus, with the result that everything he had worked for slipped away.

Once again, the lesson is clear: it’s tempting to let up when the sights around us look favorable and we think we’ve got it made. But we finish well in the Christian race only when we fix our eyes on the goal – Jesus Christ.

So you see, we have to keep our eyes on Jesus either way, whether things are going poorly, or they seem to be going very well. We court disaster when we turn our eyes away from the Lord for whatever reason.

The portion in Hebrews only reinforces what Paul has been saying. It’s as if the writer to the Hebrews is being our cheerleader in life. To put it in the modern vernacular, he is saying something like this:

Look, you’re not alone in the Christian race. In fact, you are surrounded by a great host of witnesses who have run successfully before you. They’re waiting for you at the finish line, so throw off everything that hinders or entangles – especially sin – and run with perseverance. Fix your eyes on Jesus! He put the starting blocks in place; he laid the track, he marked the finish line, and he even ran the race ahead of you amid great opposition. Think of all the Master has accomplished on your behalf so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The Christian race is not about sleepwalking, it’s about running. Columnist Herb Caen wrote something rather interesting in the *San Francisco Chronicle* a few years ago:

“Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion also wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death ... It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle; when the sun comes up, you'd better be running! In the Christian life, it's not enough simply to wake up. We are called to run, to become more like Christ, to press ahead in godliness.”

How this is underlined further in Hebrews 12, where we read, “ ***Make every effort to live in peace will all men, and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord***” (v. 14). Some don't want to hear verses like these. They want the blessings and rewards of the Christian life, but they don't want to discipline and demands that go with it.

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to throw off everything that might hinder us or slow us down in the Christian race. Have you ever read Jules Verne's novel *The Mysterious Island*? In it, he tells of five men who escape a Civil War prison camp by hijacking a hot-air balloon.

As they rise into the air, they realize that the wind is carrying them out over the ocean. Watching their homeland disappear over the horizon, they wonder how much longer the balloon will stay aloft.

As the hours pass and the balloon begins to lose altitude, they decide to cast overboard some of the weight. Shoes, weapons, and coats are reluctantly jettisoned, and for a while, the balloon maintains altitude. All too soon, however, they find themselves once again dangerously close to the water. This time, they toss their food. Better to be high and hungry than drown on a full stomach!

Unfortunately, this too proves to be only a temporary solution. The craft again threatens to lower the men into the sea. But one man has an idea: they can tie the ropes that hold the basket in such a way that they can sit on them. Then they can cut away the basket. As they sever the very thing in which they had been standing, it drops into the sea, and the balloon rises. Time passes and they eventually come within sight of land. Soon they are able to jump into the water and swim to shore. They lived because they were able to tell the difference between what was really needed and what was not. The *necessities* they once thought they could not live without turned out to be the very weights that almost cost them their lives.

This puts us in mind of some crucial questions: What do we need to sever from our lives? What is slowing us down in the Christian race? Ungodly habits? Distractions? Possessions? Are some of us in a spiritual fog because we have taken our eyes off the Lord? Maybe we're not into the Word. Perhaps our prayer-life is next to non-existent! The challenge with which we must all deal is this: **is our focus on Christ or not?**

If any of us are having difficulty persevering in the Christian life, think about the following words of wisdom:

“Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks! Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but *YOU* shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God.” – Phillip Brooks

“Never, never, never give up!” - Sir Winston Churchill

“Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal. My strength lies in my tenacity.” – Louis Pasteur

Pasteur made more than six hundred attempts at “pasteurizing” milk before he finally succeeded in perfecting the process. He never gave up!

We must never give up in our pursuit of Christ. We must pray for a faith in Him that is tenacious. The stakes are too high to fail. This is not merely about milk – it’s about life! Our destination is not merely what Florence Chadwick was aiming at, the shores of California. Our destination is the shores of eternity! Our Lord, Jesus Christ, will not let us fail. He has commanded us, however, to keep our eyes fixed steadfastly on Him.

Our great God will give us powers equal to our tasks!