

5 years ago, when my wife and I were living in a rental unit in the Villages, I joined the Sumter bike team. I had been riding my bike to church and thought I was ready to enter the big time. I had my 27 speed bike, helmet, and bright shirt. I was ready for the big-time. I road my bike to the parking lot of Barnes and Noble. Since I was a rookie at this, I joined the C Plus team. Their average speed on a trip was 14-16 miles per hour. I thought I could handle that speed. Well, I started out just fine. But at a stoplight, my group got ahead of me. I waited for the light, then peddled as hard as I could to catch up. I did not shift gears as I went up a hill. Needless to say, I was exhausted. I asked the sweep, the last biker how many miles we were doing today. He told me 30, and we had only gone 10. He recommended I head back. I felt badly that I couldn't finish the race. Later I found out from Dave Gonia, a biker from Open Bible, that I had 20 pounds of pressure in my tires, my seat was at the wrong height, and I wasn't shifting properly as I went up that hill. Plus I wasn't in biker shape like my comrades. I don't know about you, but I want to be a finisher. I don't want to be a quitter. The apostle Paul encourages me and you today as he tells us that life on earth is a marathon race. He tells us to "Press On Toward The Goal!"

Any biker in a race today, needs to have the right equipment. Proper clothing, proper shoes, tires inflated, seat at right height. Also, the bike racer needs to stay focused on the track that he is assigned to run. Coach Paul gives us all a bit of advice as we begin to run our earthly bike race. Listen to pointer number 1: He says *"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead."* Coach Paul says, *"Don't look back behind you! It could cost you big time. How might we do this?"*

The first way is by looking back on past sins. Paul himself had done a lot of horrid things in his past life. He had dragged Christians out of churches and had them thrown into prison. He had stood by and given his approval when Steven the martyr was stoned to death. He had taught a ton of people the wrong teaching that you get to heaven by being a good person. This had to bother him. But he said, "I need to forget this!"

How many times don't we dwell on our past sins? Maybe you were arguing with a family member, a classmate or a neighbor, and out of anger you said some things you shouldn't have, and you really hurt his feelings. You are haunted by what you said. What about that thing you did, and you never got caught, but you still feel bad about it today? We all have done things we regret. We feel terrible about it. In fact if we are married, our husband or wife may add to our bad feelings by bringing up stuff from the past that we've done, which puts another charley horse in our leg as we run. But my friends, because of Jesus recall how God now views our past mess-ups. In Isaiah 43:25 it says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." If our God has blotted them out, they are gone. If God has forgotten them, we should do the same.

There is another way that we Christians can look back, as we are running our race. Maybe we look back at our past accomplishments. Look I was born into a Christian home. I am successful in my business. My kids turned out decent. I am a member in good standing at my church. Yeah, I've stumbled a few times, but look at that guy. He's 2 blocks behind me. His life is a mess. Wait a minute. Your past accomplishments aren't going to get you through heaven's gates. If you try to run the race that way, the finish line gates will be closed for you. It is only because of Jesus that the finish line gates are open for you. We need to realize that it is only because of Jesus that we stand

perfect in God's court of law. We are like a person who has the title to a house in Hawaii, but we still haven't taken physical possession of what rightly belongs to us. Similarly, believers have the righteousness of Christ and are possessors of eternal life. Yet we are not yet physically in possession of the perfection of eternal life. We still make mistakes on earth, where we are far from being perfect. We need to press on, to keep striving to live a more Christian life. Paul says in verse 12: *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."*

The Japanese are fond of staging long distance relay races. One such race even goes up Mt. Fuji and back. To ensure their team the best chance of winning, many Japanese universities recruit athletes from African countries famous for their long distance runners. In a sense, Jesus was "recruited" by God the Father to run for Team Humanity. He became a member of our team when he was born of the Virgin Mary. But Jesus wasn't sent to help us get to heaven by anchoring the last leg of the race after we had done our part. No, he ran the whole race without any help from us. We couldn't give Jesus any help because sin so incapacitated us that it was as if every bone in our body had been shattered so that we couldn't even army crawl a centimeter of the race. On the other hand Jesus ran the whole race never stopping or stumbling once. And although he won the race without any help from us, we still share in the prize because he is on our team. It's just like when every member of a gold-medal winning hockey team receives a medal even though not every member may have played in the winning game.

If Jesus has already won the prize of heaven for us, why do we have to "press on" toward the goal (a phrase Paul uses twice in our text)? While the race has been run and won, the prize has yet to be placed around our neck. Well it shouldn't be so difficult to make it to the winner's podium to claim the prize Jesus won for us, should it? You wouldn't think so but Satan, the world, and our own sinful nature are trying hard to keep us from claiming the prize. That's why Paul explained, "13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it."

What would you think of an Olympian who missed the medals ceremony because someone invited him out to the bar before hand and he forgot all about the ceremony? You'd think that he had been pretty shortsighted. He threw away the memory of a lifetime for a few beers. That's what Satan is working hard to do. He wants to take our focus off the goal of heaven and indulge our sinful nature rather than deny it. He wants us to think that immediate (but temporary) gratification is better than waiting on the eternal joys of heaven.

Another word of caution. Be careful with the pack of racers that surround you. There are racers out there that could trip you up, or bump into you and cause you to fall. Paul says, "Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, and their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame."

Paul tells us that there are a lot of runners in our world today, who you might say are overeaters. Not that they are eating a lot of French fries and fatty foods, but that they live their lives to satisfy their desires and passions.. They make the cravings of their heart their god. Their god is their stomach. The Lord says, "their glory is in their shame." In other words, instead of being embarrassed by their sins, they are proud of them, and they flaunt them! When I received my call to the Villages over 5 years ago, some people in my former congregation said, "Pastor, you don't want to go down to the Villages. Did you

hear that the Villages leads the country in STD's? I was a bit naive back then, and they had to explain to me what that meant. Basically, for many Villagers, life consists of having as much fun as possible before you die. You might say, their God is their stomach. Friends and fun is where it is at. A close relationship with Jesus is not in the picture. They may check in for a church service or a mass, but that is the extent of their relationship with God.

To get ahead in Hollywood today, young actresses need to compromise their body to powerful and wealthy men. Recently, we heard of charges against Harvey Weinstein that have surfaced. The women seem to be lining up with charges now that its out in the open. Hugh Hefner, who recently died, made his fortune with his Playboy magazine and his playboy mansion. As God predicted, their glory is in their shame. Paul sums up this sad lifestyle by saying, "their mind is on earthly things."

Be careful Christian what you allow your eyes to see and ears to hear. Don't let your money and your time be wasted on those who glory in their shame. Remember, our focus should not be on earthly things, but on heavenly things. For our citizenship is in heaven.

When the Olympics were held in Beijing, China, there was a day, when all the various nations came into the large stadium, waving their flags, wearing the colors of their country, smiling, and laughing. They were all proud of being citizens of their respective countries.

The people to whom Paul was writing appreciated the value of citizenship – Roman citizenship. The Philippians were so proud of their Roman citizenship that they dressed like Romans, spoke like Romans, and even built their city to look like Rome. Roman citizenship was valued because it afforded one a measure of protection and justice to which non-citizens were not entitled.

Paul, however, wanted the Christians in Philippi to remember that they had something much better than Roman citizenship; they were citizens of heaven. This fact would bring them comfort because, as powerful as the Roman state was, it could not free its citizens from worry, pain, sorrow, or death. No government can do that. In fact government sometimes adds to our pain doesn't it? So what are the perks of being citizens of heaven? Paul explains: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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" (Philip. 3:20, 21).

Many people wish they had the body of a model or a movie star. They want this so badly that they are willing to pay good money for personal trainers and plastic surgeons to get such a body. But no matter how good your personal trainer or plastic surgeon is, one thing they cannot do is stave off the inevitable – death. It doesn't matter how wonderful you look in life because in death we'll all look pretty rotten. But now for citizens of heaven there is hope. Paul says that when the end of the world comes, our Savior Jesus will return, raise the dead, and give believers bodies like his own glorified body - a body that can never grow old, become sick, or die!

So, let's continue to eat a steady diet of God's Word, regularly drink the Jesus Energy Drink called the Lord's Supper, and keep running, keeping our eyes straight ahead on the prize that awaits us. Press On, Christian, Press on. Keep running! Be a strong finisher! Amen.