

Several years ago, my daughter Carolyn and I entered a Volkswagen Mini-van in Sharm el Sheikh. It was 11:00 P.M. at night. A driver, a guard with a semi-automatic weapon and pistol, a brother and sister, and a married couple joined us. We drove for 3 hours through various checkpoints to Mt. Sinai. When we arrived, we received flashlights for the 3 hour hike to the top. We were going to see the sun rise at the top of Mt. Sinai, and join other Christians there who would be singing songs of praise to God. I was 60 pounds overweight. My daughter pushed on ahead. She was at the front of our group. Some Bedouins suggested to me that I rent a camel for 2/3 of the trip. But I was a little nervous about giving them money, and trusting the camel on the steep corners with steep drop-offs. As time went on, I became exhausted. Some Bedouins wanted to help me, but the tour guide said, "Rev. Schulz, don't do that, they will just want tip money from you". Plus, I thought if Moses made it to the top, so could I. My heart was pounding. My daughter had abandoned me. I could have had the big heart attack right there on Sinai. But I was going to keep going. This was a race. A Race to the top before the sun rose. I knew the goal, and I was bound and determined I was going to make it. Well, our Christian life is like my trip up Sinai. Doing life on this earth is tough. It's a long race, a tiring race. You can't always count on others to help you. The apostle Paul encourages us today that life is a marathon race. He tells us to "Press On"!

Any runner in a race today, needs to have the right equipment. Proper clothing, tennis shoes are important. Also, the runner 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 life 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."*

A marathon runner trains intensely during the week. He or she makes a commitment to never quit training. As we get older, it is important we keep in training, by exercising our minds. Some of us do crossword puzzles, suduko, or read. In the very near future, my wife and I plan to take a couple classes at the Life Long Learning Center in the Villages. You are never too old to learn new things.

Well, it's the same way in the Christian life. We never reach a point where we can say, I have arrived and know all that I need to know spiritually. Christian marathon runners are constantly striving to be better runners for Christ. They study the Word.

Why? Why do we want to be better runners? Because Jesus Christ has taken hold of us. Our lesson says, *"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."* Jesus came down to earth and ran a perfect race. The whole time Jesus was here on earth, he ran perfectly. He never once stumbled. He never looked back and not for a second did he lose his focus. He loved us so much, that he ran the race perfectly. His finish line was the cross, and he made it there. Then he rose again to assure us of His victory. He did it all for us so that we don't have to be perfect. He forgives us for those times we stumble in our race. He forgives us for all the bad things that we've done. He forgives us for those times you look back in pride and say, 'at least I'm better than that guy.' As we are straining to run the right way, remember the amazing love by which Jesus has taken hold of us. Press on. Keep your focus on the finish line. Christ took hold of you so that you would finish, and be in heaven oneday. Take hold of that in your mind as you run.

One word of caution. Be careful with the pack of runners that surround you. There are runners 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! Someone told me a year ago, I don't know if it is true or not, that if someone has a sponge on their car in the Villages, it means they are a swinger couple. That means they are willing to swap marriage partners now and then. Someone else told me, "Pastor, you don't want to move into that village. It has a rep for one party after another, cruise ship trips, and just a seize the day mentality. Studying the Bible and living a Christian life is not on the agenda for most of the people in that Village. The apostle Paul,

had it right, “Their God is their stomach.” They are Seize the Day People! A close relationship with Jesus is not in the picture at this point in time, even if they are retired. Look at the advertising on TV. Ads promote something that you just have to have, to bring you more satisfaction in your life. Musical performances today continue to push the envelope as stars not only show off their bodies, but perform songs with lyrics that glorify and encourage immoral behavior. As God predicted, their glory is in their shame. It’s so easy for the Christian to get sucked in to this way of thinking and suppose it’s all normal, because, hey, everybody does this, it’s all around us, so it must be OK! Paul sums up this sad lifestyle by saying, “their mind is on earthly things.” What makes these people tick is the here and now. They are only living for today.

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 rather our citizenship 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.