

Text: Philippians 3:10-14

Theme: Pressing on Toward the Goal

I was down to the last half mile and I was out of gas. It was the longest race I had ever run, 13 miles of boredom and exhaustion, and there was nothing left in the tank. I thought I was sunk. But as I crossed the marker for the final quarter of a mile in agony, something saved me. The racing app on my phone started blasting out the world's greatest pump-song ever—*the Eye of the Tiger*—the epic Rocky Balboa theme song. As the first beats of that song began to play, I took off for the finish line like it was a hundred-meter dash and finished in an all-out sprint, carried by the beat of Eye of the Tiger coursing through my veins. Not an ounce of brain power left, only the thought of the finish line.

Now the point of my racing story is by no means to show you my racing prowess because that was likely the first and last of those races I'll ever run. The point was to bring you into the imagery that the Apostle Paul uses today to picture the race of our spiritual lives. Maybe you thought the American obsession with sports was something new. No, Paul uses the same kind of sports competition imagery to connect with his audience in Philippi, who loved the Greek Olympic games.

Even if you think your racing days either never were or are long behind you, you can't avoid the fact that if you're breathing, you're in a spiritual race for the end, a race that involves both your body and soul. I ran across a scary statistic that said one of those "new normals" is that half of all Americans are facing "burnout" at their jobs, and you can only wonder how far the other half is behind them. That feeling can quickly take over your whole life, including your spiritual life.

Today, as Paul encourages the Philippian Christians to keep **pressing on toward the goal**, he gives what we might call a spiritual "Eye of the Tiger" speech, something to bring new life to their legs and new energy to get them to the finish line.

Frame of Mind

Apparently runners have an old adage, "Running is 90% mental." So first, Paul addresses the Christian's **frame of mind** during this race of life. He outlines for us what this race is all about. **"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."**

There's three key things here with which we want to equip our frame of minds. **1)** Knowing Christ means knowing the power of the resurrection, the power that raised Christ to life is the same power that brings us to life and gives us power for the race. **2)** Knowing Christ means not skipping straight to the glory, but taking up the cross just as he did and participating in his sufferings. It means becoming like him in his death, dying to yourself and to the boasting of the world and the pleasures of your sinful soul, and running the race marked out for you through trial and pain. "No pain, no gain," we might say. **3)** But knowing Christ not only means pain, it also the greatest gain, that we attain to the resurrection of the dead, that he will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. Knowing Christ means we know exactly what to expect in the race: **1)** we've got his power, **2)** we'll endure his pain, **3)** we'll receive his reward.

That's a huge advantage for us because the race is 90% mental. With those three things burned into our minds, there is one last critical thing we need to know—where we stand in the race! We may know how the race will end, but we're not at the finish line! We are somewhere in the middle of the race competing, with miles and minutes yet to go and the trophy not yet in hand, and that gives us the one-track mind, the "spiritual Eye of the Tiger" to press on! Paul says, **"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it."**

Remember who is talking here! Paul the missionary of missionaries, the pastor of pastors, the inspired writer of half the books of the New Testament who at the moment he writes these words was sitting in prison for preaching. This was the man who had been suffering for the name of Christ for the last 25 years. If anybody had run a good race, if anybody had laurels to rest on, it might be him.

But Paul the "Chief of Sinners" puts that self-priding nonsense to rest immediately. Perfection and glory had not yet been attained, and if he hadn't arrived at it yet, then we certainly haven't either. No laurels to rest on. No matter how long we've been a member, no matter how much ministry we've been a part of, no matter how beautiful our

campus is. God has taken hold of us to move **forward in faith**, sharing more and more in the sufferings of Christ. Our **frame of mind**, our “eye” is always focused ahead, **pressing on toward the goal** for which Christ called us.

So with our minds in the right **frame of mind**, fixed on the goal, Paul then brings us into the heat of the race where it's time for fierce and constant progress.

Constant Progress Toward the Goal

“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,” (Philippians 3:13). One of the biggest running mistakes is to look backward! If runners turn around to look backward, it means they're looking to see how much time and space they've got until they get passed. They're wondering if they can let off the gas for a while. For one, it means their eyes are off the goal, and who knows what they might run into while they're looking backward. More importantly, now they're not running to win the race so much as they are running to not lose. They've lost the “Eye,” their hunger for the finish line and that means it's only a matter of time until they're overtaken.

It's tempting for us to start coasting while we try to look backward, either to take a break and take pride in how much we've accomplished in the race so far or to mull over our failings at each marker along the way. We can act as if we've already won the crown with the race only half over. Or we can let our past sins, regrets, and guilt fill us so full of spiritual cramps that they seize us up and we burn out.

These are dangerous enemies behind us—boastful pride in our achievements, or guilt from our failures—both of which can destroy us. We can't afford to waste one second of the race coasting on the status quo. For Christ has called us forward in faith, straining for the goal and pressing on tirelessly. As Paul says, **“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”**

Now maybe at this point all this talk of straining and pressing on is just making you feel even more exhausted, even closer to crashing and burning on the track, as if this all just comes down to a matter of “trying harder,” or “going faster” on an empty tank. That's why it's so important to remember the right frame of mind all along. It's finally here when we've got nothing left that we come to realize we were never running by our own strength to begin with.

God's call to us, by which he took hold of us and called us heavenward in Christ Jesus is the very thing that makes us able to run to him with a never failing source of energy. Christ has unleashed the power of his resurrection into our weak and lowly bodies so that we may continue to run until we arrive at our goal, the final removal of our sinful nature and the transformation of our lowly bodies. The race is hard, but the reward is certain because God has called to receive it, and his power is what brings us to the finish line.

As Paul says in Colossians, **“To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.” (Colossians 1:29).** His energy never runs out. His tank is never empty. But we may need to relearn how to tap into this unyielding source of this resurrection power!

Pressing on toward the goal, that is, our spiritual goal of heaven, does not mean incessant unending physical work and activity. Burying ourselves in nothing but work and business might actually be the worst kind of spiritual laziness. The most important part of pressing on toward the goal is regularly and intentionally filling up our souls with the energy and power that comes from the spiritual food God has given us in his Word. You know how miserable a day without breakfast can be, start the day off with spiritual breakfast. Begin the week with a spiritual feast. His Word gives “life from the dead” kind of power to revive our legs and hearts to keep us pressing on toward the goal.

The Final Reward

And when at last, we've reached the finish line, having persevered under trial and stood the test by God's power and grace, we will receive the victor's reward, crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. Amen.