

A FRESH START

Phil. 3:12-14

by Pastor Emerson Manaloto

The beginning of a new year is always the best time to assess our Christian lives and make resolutions that will address areas where we have not grown and need improvement. Some of us may be slow to start while others may not make it to the finish line. The common problems causing this lack of spiritual growth are complacency ("lagging behind"), closure ("looking back"), and concentration ("losing focus"). Following the three instructions of Paul as a "spiritual athlete," who put into his spiritual walk the kind of discipline that Olympic runners put into their chosen sport, will help us have a fresh start this New Year.

1. Having a Sense of _____ (vv. 12-13a).

"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. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. . ."

a. Be content with the gifts God has given you, but be dissatisfied with your present spiritual state. Paul is satisfied with Jesus only, but like an excellent athlete, he has a good sense of discontent with his knowledge and likeness of Him (3:10-11), which deters him from becoming spiritual complacent.

b. Paul, though a spiritual giant in the eyes of the Philippian saints, has not considered himself spiritually better than others (cf. 2:3). He might have labeled himself as someone who "has not already been made perfect" to refer sarcastically to the Judaizers, who thought they had reached perfection.

c. Several Christians nowadays are self-satisfied because they compare their "running" with that of other Christians, usually those who are not making much progress. Had Paul compared himself with others, he would have been tempted to be proud ("confident in the flesh," 3:4-8); but he only compared himself with himself and with Jesus Christ.

If you had to compare your life in Christ right now to a race track, where would you be? How well can you personally assess your spiritual life in the past year in terms of knowing Christ and becoming like Him? Are you satisfied with that? God never wants you to be complacent with your spiritual attainments. If you feel you have already "arrived" spiritually you would never grow towards maturity. No believer has yet obtained absolute knowledge and likeness of Christ! So like the runner in a race, keep on pressing on toward that goal.

2. Having a Sense of _____ (v. 13b).

"...But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind. . ."

a. In the ancient world, the term "forget" was used of a runner who passed another in a race. Once in front, the lead runner didn't look back. He forgot what lay behind him and kept his focus solely on the tape in front of him.

b. To forget is not to lose one's memory of the past but to have a conscious refusal to let it absorb his attention and impede his progress by not looking back anymore for something that is settled before God, where there is already closure. So Paul never allowed his past Jewish heritage or his previous Christian attainments to obstruct his running of the race: "...I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ" (3:8b). Like Christ, the selfless apostle chose to lay aside those privileges (cf. 2:6) which he used to be confident of. Then he refused to stay in his sinful past.

c. Just as a runner's speed is decreasing should he think of those behind him so the Christian's onward progress is hindered, should he dwell on the past full of failures and sins, full of heartaches and discouragement, full of disappointments and frustrated hopes, plans, and dreams. As long as a Christian has made things right with God and man, he should have a curtailed past.

You may wish that you could erase certain bad memories, but you cannot. Yes, you will not forget the past, but be no longer influenced or affected by it. You can't change the past but you can change its meaning in your life. You can break the power of the past by living for the future and that should be your direction.

3. Having a Sense of _____ (vv. 13c-14).

"...and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

a. To "strain toward" is "to stretch forth after" as in the case of a runner who needs to stretch himself to the point of straining his muscles. So like Paul, you must strain every spiritual muscle with the same intensity in order to reach your spiritual goal (cf. "... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 2:12b).

b. To "press on" is to eagerly pursue a prey as in the case of a hunter. It is also parallel to or same as the "zeal" Paul employed when he persecuted the church (3:6).

c. The calling "heavenward" may relate to the summons to the winner to approach the elevated stand of the judge and receive the prize. Paul may have referred to ultimate salvation in God's presence, or to receiving rewards at "the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10). While only one athlete may receive a prize, all Christians may receive the reward. Furthermore, the laurel wreath of the Olympic Games will fade, but the crown Christ gives will never fade.

Are you like so many who simply go through the motions but have little desire to finish the Lord's race? Are you always beginning, but never finishing? The winners are those who concentrate, who fix their eyes on the goal and let nothing distract them (Hebrews 12:1, 2). Concentration is the secret of power.

Therefore, if you're lagging behind, looking back, and losing focus at the very onset of the year, you would never make it to the finish line. Our Christian life is like a race. It has a beginning, but what really matters is its end. So begin your life with an end in mind. But don't forget that your life's end is not just about finishing the race but also winning the prize. Furthermore, remember also that you are not alone in the race of life. We run together and help each other until the end! If last year you were not able to press on toward the goal of knowing more the Lord and being like Him, this 2017 why don't you have a fresh start?