

DON'T LOOK BACK Philippians 3

The Miracle Mile (1:42)

On May 6, 1954, Roger Bannister became the first man in history to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. Within 2 months, John Landy eclipsed the record by 1.4 seconds. On August 7, 1954, the two met together for a historic race. As they moved into the last lap, Landy held the lead. It looked as if he would win, but as he neared the finish he was haunted by the question, "Where is Bannister?" As he turned to look, Bannister took the lead. Landy later told a *Time* magazine reporter, "If I hadn't looked back, I would have won!"

Our Daily Bread, August, 1995, page for August 7

One of the most descriptive pictures of the Christian life in the Bible is of an athlete competing in a race. That is the analogy that Paul uses right in the middle of the passage we are going to look at today ... **PHILIPPIANS 3:12-14**, and let's take a look ... **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. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

Just like John Landy ... the very thing that keeps the Christian from living out the life of Christ in them is that they get distracted ... they look back.

Paul's whole point in **CHAPTER 3** could be summed up in **VERSE 13** ... **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead**

Too often we are like John Landy ... instead of straining toward what is ahead ... we look back ... and it really messes us up in our Christian living. We lose focus!

In our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul takes a look at the past ... present ... and future and tells us how futile the past was and to keep our eyes on the goal.

1 ... PAST: FOCUSING ON RELIGION

VERSES 1-6 ... Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Paul pulls no punches here in these verses ... He calls the religious leaders “dogs.”

Now to some of you that is a sweet thing. When you think of dogs ... you think of something like this: **PICTURE ... PUPPY**. When you think of a dog, you think of cute and cuddly pet ... faithful and playful. That is not at all what the people of Paul’s time thought of when they thought of dogs. This is a more accurate picture: **PICTURE ... MEAN DOG**.

Dogs were not pets in New Testament times ... they were something to be avoided.

Paul did not pick the word “dog” by accident when he is talking about the religious leaders ...

- The dogs would roam the streets seeking something to eat ... the religious teachers roamed about looking for opportunities to spread their teachings
- The dogs were sly and cunning, so were the religious leaders
- The dogs represented a danger to those who encountered them ... the religious leaders represented spiritual danger to those who followed them.

What were they teaching that was so bad? They were teaching legalism. They were teaching that salvation comes through works. That is what Paul is talking about when he says **confidence in the flesh**. Fulfilling what God wants in our lives through our own efforts.

Listen to some of their rules to obtain salvation through works:

- One couldn't eat an egg if a hen laid it on the Sabbath--considered work.
- One couldn't scratch a misquote bite on Sabbath--it's considered work.
- If you looked in a mirror on the Sabbath and saw a gray hair--you couldn't pluck it out--that's work.
- There even was a law concerning the size of hanky you could carry in your pocket. It had to be a small one

We might laugh and think how ridiculous that might be ... but listen to some rules that some churches have today ...

- Do not go to Pizza Hut ... because they serve beer.
- Do not go to movie theaters ... even if the movie is “The Passion of Christ.”
- Do not mow the yard on Sunday.
- Do not play cards.
- Do not dance.

In **VERSES 4-6** Paul tells us that he knows what he is talking about because he has been there. He shares with us what his past was like. He tells us that he has gone the religious route. And it failed him!

Listen ... when our focus is on rules and regulations ... do's and don'ts ... then we are in a religion ... not a relationship with Christ. And there is a huge difference with extremely different results.

2 ... PRESENT: FOCUSING ON THE REDEEMER

Paul turns from the past to look at the present in **VERSES 7-11** ... ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul realized that all those things he tried to accomplish in his religious life was a complete failure. It did not make him any more like what God really wanted him to be than anything.

A few weeks ago, Vicki and I watched a really good movie recommended to us by Amy Mercer. The title of the movie is *The Resurrection of Gavin Stone*. In the movie Gavin ... who is an actor by vocation ... pretends to be a Christian. He actually gets on the internet and studies how Christians act. The key word there is act. He did all the right things ... but the fact is he was just as pagan as he was before he ever started acting like a Christian. I won't tell you the end of the movie. You need to see it for yourself. But Gavin captures what Paul is saying. When your focus is on acting like Jesus rather than living like Jesus ... you are going to fail.

When Paul quit focusing on religion and started focusing on the Redeemer ... everything changed! He realized that everything he was focusing on was simply garbage. And what do you do with garbage? You throw it out because it is not worth anything.

So ... notice what happens when his focus is turned to the Redeemer

- He gave up rules for a relationship
- He gave up religion for righteousness
- He gave up rituals for a resurrection

I want to share a story with you that is somewhat lengthy but captures this whole point ...

The cheerful girl with bouncy golden curls was almost five. Waiting with her mother at the checkout stand, she saw them: a circle of glistening white pearls in a pink foil box. "Oh please, Mommy. Can I have them? Please, Mommy, please?" Quickly the mother checked the back of the little foil box and then looked back into the pleading blue eyes of her little girl's upturned face. "A dollar ninety-five. That's almost \$2.00. If you really want them, I'll think of some extra chores for you and in no time, you can save enough money to buy them for yourself. Your birthday's only a week away and you might get another crisp dollar bill from Grandma." As soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her penny bank and counted out 17 pennies. After dinner, she did more than her share of chores and she went to the neighbor and asked Mrs. McJames if she could pick dandelions for ten cents.

On her birthday, Grandma did give her another new dollar bill and at last she had enough money to buy the necklace. Jenny loved her pearls. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere-Sunday school, kindergarten, even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bubble bath. Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green. Jenny had a very loving daddy and every night when she was ready for bed, he would stop whatever he was doing and come upstairs to read her a story. One night when he finished the story, he asked Jenny, "Do you love me?" "Oh yes, Daddy. You know that I love you." "Then give me your pearls." "Oh, Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess - the white horse from my collection. The one with the pink tail. Remember, Daddy? The one you gave me. She's my favorite." "That's okay, Honey. Daddy loves you. Good night." And he brushed her cheek with a kiss. About a week later, after the story time, Jenny's daddy asked again, "Do you love me?" "Daddy, you know I love you." "Then give me your pearls." "Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll. The brand new one I got for my birthday. She is so beautiful and you can have the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper." "That's okay. Sleep well. God bless you, little one. Daddy loves you." And as always, he brushed her cheek with a gentle kiss. A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed Indian-style. As he came close, he noticed her chin was trembling and one silent tear rolled down her cheek. "What is it, Jenny? What's the matter?" Jenny didn't say anything but lifted her little hand up to her daddy. And when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. With a little quiver, she finally said, "Here, Daddy. It's for you." With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny's kind daddy reached out with one hand to take the dime-store necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jenny. He had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the dime-store stuff so he could give her genuine treasure.

Paul fully understands ... and wants us to understand ... that what we thought was good when we were doing religion is nothing compared to a relationship with Jesus Christ! He is telling us to trade in religion for a relationship.

3 ... FUTURE: FOCUSING ON THE REWARD

VERSES 12-14 ... ¹² 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. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

In the booklet *Bits and Pieces* is an interesting story about Florence Chadwick, the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. On the Fourth of July in 1951, she attempted to swim from Catalina Island to the California coast. The challenge was not so much the distance, but the bone-chilling waters of the Pacific. To complicate matters, a dense fog lay over the entire area, making it impossible for her to see land. After about 15 hours in the water, and within a half mile of her goal, Chadwick gave up. Later she told a reporter, "Look, I'm not excusing myself. But if I could have seen land, I might have made it."

Paul tells us in these verses that he has not reached the shore of heaven yet. But he is not going to give up. He is going to press on until he reaches the finish line.

Too many people give up before they arrive. And I am convinced that the biggest reason is because they do not keep their eyes on the reward.

How do we reach our goal? How do we keep from giving up? ...

1 ... Keep good examples set before you

VERSE 17 ... ¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

Most coaches will have their team watch videos of people who are really good at the sport they play. You are to watch what they do and learn from them. That is what Paul is telling us to do. Focus on holy people who have run the race. See how they are running the race and do the same.

2 ... Do not let this world sidetrack you

VERSES 18-19 ... ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

I remember when our son, Brandon was a little tyke playing T-ball. Time and time again the outfielders would be chasing butterflies instead of focusing on the game? That is exactly what Paul is saying “don’t do”. Do not let the things of this world make you lose focus. You are not the same person you used to be ... so don’t act like it! You are to chase after Christ ... not after the things of this world.

3 ... Remember what Christ has waiting for you

VERSES 20-21 ... ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ 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.

A few years ago, I performed a wedding ceremony of John and Laura Hargrave ... ok, so maybe it was more than a few years ago. John and his groomsmen were all standing in front of the church worship center as Laura and her father started down the aisle. The closer she got to the front the bigger her smile was. When she reached the front, it was like she reached her goal. It was so cool to see. She had a goal ... John ... and she never took her eyes off of him all the way down the aisle.

I really like John ... and I am so glad to be friends with him and Laura ... and even Luke and Ben. But let me tell you ... as great as John is ... we have a far greater goal to set our eyes on ... the city we will be citizens of ... Heaven. That is what is waiting for us ... and we need to remember to never take our eyes off of it!

Johnson Oatman Jr. captures this well in a wrote a great hymn he wrote titled “Higher Ground” ... listen to the words ...

I’m pressing on the upward way,
New heights I’m gaining every day;
Still praying as I onward bound,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

CONCLUSION

John Landy was fully convinced that he would have won that race against Bannister if he had not looked back. I don’t know if he would have or not. But I do know this ... if you refuse to look back ... if you keep your eyes upon the goal ... you will win.