



Paul compares the Christian life to that of running a race. It's an appropriate analogy because there is a starting line (when you accept Christ), a finish line (when you step from this life into eternity), and a prize at the end (heaven). Some have gotten off to a late start, others have had a slow start, and all of us have stumbled at some point along the race. But the only thing that matters is finishing well! In Philippians 3, Paul outlines three things to encourage us to run with endurance and to finish well.

1. Context
  - a. The theme
    - i. Paul mentions "joy" 14 times in Philippians.
      1. Proportionally, Philippians has more to say about joy than any other book in the Bible.
    - ii. In previous verses, Paul gave Believers six reasons to rejoice.
      1. God will finish what He started concerning us (**Philippians 1:6**).
      2. God will use our "chains" for His divine purposes (**Philippians 1:13**).
      3. To live is Christ, to die is gain (**Philippians 1:21**).
      4. Unity comes through humility; humility comes from following the example of Jesus (**Philippians 2:2-5**).
      5. Our witness impacts our world (**Philippians 2:14-16**).
      6. Nothing in life compares to knowing Christ (**Philippians 3:7-11**).
    - iii. In **Philippians 3:12-16**, Paul gave a seventh reason.
      1. Run the race and finish well (**Philippians 3:12-16**).
  - b. **Philippians 3:12-16** – “[12] Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. [13] Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, [14] I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. [16] Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.”
    - a. Verse 15 implies, if you disagree with this, God help you.
2. **Philippians 3:12-16** – “[12] Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. [13] Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, [14] I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. [16] Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.”
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3. The Christian race

- a. A frequent comparison
  - i. Outside of this passage, Paul compared Christianity to running a race five other times.
    - 1. Paul speaks of running with joy in **Acts 20:24**.
    - 2. Paul speaks of running to receive the prize in **1 Corinthians 9:24**.
    - 3. Paul speaks of running with purpose in **1 Corinthians 9:26**.
    - 4. Paul speaks of running well in **Galatians 5:7**.
    - 5. Paul speaks of finishing the race in **2 Timothy 4:7**.
  - ii. Likely, Paul liked and was influenced by the sports common to the Roman Empire:
    - 1. The Isthmian Games.
    - 2. The Olympic Games.
- b. The similarities
  - i. There are many similarities between a race and the Christian life.
    - 1. The starting line is when we are born again.
    - 2. The finish line is when we step into eternity.
    - 3. The prize at the end of the race is heaven.
    - 4. **DISCUSS:** How does remembering you are heaven-bound change how you perceive your temporary trials on earth?
  - ii. The Christian race is a race of endurance.
  - iii. Our main competitor in this race is ourselves.
    - 1. We have an Enemy, but *“greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world”* (**1 John 4:4**).
    - 2. We primarily contend with our flesh.
- c. The starting line
  - i. Some bemoan the kind of start they had:
    - 1. Some bemoan their late start because of what they did when they were in the world.
    - 2. Some bemoan their slow start because they took their faith seriously later in life.
    - 3. Some bemoan the stumbles they had along the way, which are common to all.
      - a. **James 3:2a** – *“We all stumble in many ways.”* (NIV)
  - ii. More important than how we start is how we finish.
    - 1. **2 Timothy 4:7–8** – *“[7] I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. [8] Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”* (NIV)

4. **Philippians 3:12-14** – “[12] Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. [13] Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, [14] I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”
- a. Run with humility.
    - i. We must not be stagnant about where we are spiritually.
      1. Paul was transparent, saying he was still a work in progress.
      2. Do not be arrogant toward other Believers as if you “*have already attained.*”
      3. Instead, be aware you too could fall.
      4. **DISCUSS:** What makes believing you’ve “*already attained*” dangerous? How has God been working on you recently?
    - ii. **Hebrews 10:14** – “*By one offering He [Christ] has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.*”
      1. We are “*perfected*” in that we are saved after we trust in the finished work of Christ.
      2. But we are “*being sanctified*” in the present, passive tense.
      3. As we run this race surrendered to God, we are “*being sanctified*” (separated as holy) unto the Lord.
      4. We will not be fully sanctified until we are in the presence of God.
  - b. An example of pride, an example of humility
    - i. As the saying goes, “Pride is the pregnant mother of all sins.”
      1. Pride was the original sin.
      2. The first sin was not Adam and Eve’s disobedience, but Satan’s rebellion against God due to pride.
      3. After his fall, Satan deceived Adam and Eve into believing that God is not good and has been doing so ever since.
    - ii. **Matthew 11:28-30** – “[28] *Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*”
      1. Jesus humbled Himself by coming down to save us, giving us an example to live by.
      2. **DISCUSS:** How does Christ’s humility for your sake inspire you to humble yourself? What benefits have you experienced when you humbled yourself before God (**Matthew 11:28-30**)?
      3. We should humble ourselves by inviting God to shape us more each day into the image of His Son.

4. **DISCUSS:** Do you invite God to shape you daily (**Psalm 139:23–24; Luke 9:23–26; 1 Corinthians 15:31**)?
  5. **James 4:6b** – *“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*
  6. John Newton was previously the captain of a slave trading ship. But after his conversion, he eventually saw the evils of slavery.
  7. This is why in Newton’s song “Amazing Grace,” he marveled that God would save a wretch like him.
  8. Near the end of his life, Newton wrote in his journal, *“I am not what I ought to be—ah, how imperfect and deficient! I am not what I wish to be—I abhor what is evil, and I would cleave to what is good! I am not what I hope to be—soon, soon shall I put off mortality, and with mortality all sin and imperfection. Yet, though I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor what I hope to be, I can truly say, I am not what I once was; a slave to sin and Satan; and I can heartily join with the apostle, and acknowledge, ‘By the grace of God I am what I am.’”*
5. **Philippians 3:13** – *“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead.”*
- a. Run facing forward, not looking behind.
    - i. We all have pasts.
      1. Our pasts may be eventful or uneventful, depending on when we came to know Christ.
      2. Our pasts may be long (because of old age) or short (because of youth).
      3. Our pasts involve things we did and things done to us.
    - ii. Paul was not being dismissive of the Philippian Believers’ pasts—all that we live through shapes us.
      1. We are not called to live in the past, whether it was good or bad.
      2. Our past is meant to refine us, not to define us.
        - a. **Isaiah 48:10** – *“Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.”*
        - b. As fire refines silver and gold by bringing impurities to the surface to eliminate them, we also are refined when trials bring our sins to the surface to eliminate them.
        - c. **DISCUSS:** How do we make use of our trials instead of letting them pass by without shaping us?
      3. Be careful how you identify yourself. You are a child of the Most High God.

- a. In Christ, you are not your sins—you are one of the redeemed.
      - b. **Psalm 107:1–2a** – “[1] *Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. [2] Let the redeemed of the LORD say so.*”
      - c. **DISCUSS:** What is the difference between letting the past shape you and letting it define you? How has God enabled you to learn from the past without staying there?
    - b. God calls us to live in the present.
      - i. No one can live the Christian life focused on the past or worried about the future.
        - 1. Corrie Ten Boom was moved around three times in concentration camps.
        - 2. Corrie Ten Boom said, “If you look at the world, you’ll be distressed. If you look within, you’ll be depressed. If you look at God, you’ll be at rest.”
        - 3. **DISCUSS:** Why is it easy to forget to live in the present even when we know the present is the only time in which we can make a difference? How has God helped you live for Him and His kingdom now rather than focusing on the past or the future?
6. **Philippians 3:14** – *“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* (NIV)
- a. Run with your eyes on the prize.
    - i. Heaven is the reward of all who finish in Christ.
      - 1. **DISCUSS:** How does knowing your future—an eternity spent with Jesus—influence how you spend your time in the present?
    - ii. **Philippians 3:20–21** – “[20] *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.*”
      - 1. Heaven is our ultimate home.
      - 2. For Believers, this world is as bad as it gets.
      - 3. For unbelievers, this world is as good as it gets.
      - 4. **John 14:2** – *“In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”*
      - 5. **1 Corinthians 15:19** – *“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”* (KJV)
  - b. Run with endurance.

- i. **Hebrews 12:1** – “[1] *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. [2] Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. [3] Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*” (1984 NIV)
  - 1. The “cloud of witnesses” refers to the great men and women of faith discussed in **Hebrews 11**.
  - 2. **DISCUSS**: How has meditating on the many stories of the heroes of the faith—and on the life of the Hero of our faith—encouraged you to not lose heart?
- ii. **Galatians 6:9** – “*Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.*”

\* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James (NKJV)