

Each year a few thousand hopefuls run the Boston Marathon. The first place runner will typically complete the 26 miles in just under two hours and ten minutes. That's running at a pace of a little over five minutes a mile. Those who are serious—but not world class—runners will finish in about three hours. Those running just for the fun of it will finish in six hours or less. Because of injury, cramps, heat exhaustion, or failing to follow the proper course, a significant number will not finish the race. Others who quit before the finish claim to have come to their senses before it was too late!

The Apostle Paul indicates that an athlete competing for a ribbon or medal is a good metaphor for life in Christ. And that life is not a sprint. It is very much like a marathon or cross-country race. Paul writes: "...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Keep striving to exercise your faith in Jesus, no matter where you're at in the marathon of life.

Where are you in the race today? The first ten miles of the race can be compared to our childhood, teenage, and young adult years. At the beginning, the adrenaline is pumping, the crowd is cheering, and some runners go out fast. Others find it frustrating to be stuck in the pack until it begins to move apart. Patience does not come easily when you are ready to go for it. You have the talent and the energy, but do you have a plan? Are you tempted to cheat to get an advantage? Runners can also make major mistakes when they are overconfident and refuse to listen to good coaching. In the first ten miles, we feel like we've got a lot to prove to everyone—including ourselves.

The second phase of the race, from eleven to twenty miles, is like our middle years. The early energy and adrenaline are gone. Boredom and fatigue are now the primary obstacles. There aren't many spectators lining the streets at this point. It's at this point in the race when you might begin to doubt your career; your calling; your marriage. The future doesn't look so great, and it's too late to go back and start over again. So what do you do? Quit? Take a shortcut? Keep plugging along? This is where the reality of the race sets in. Some find a good rhythm; some struggle to put one foot in front of the other.

The third and final phase of the race consists of the last six miles. It's said that because of the drain on your body's reserves after running the first twenty miles, it's like you've only run halfway. It takes as much or more courage to run the last six miles as it did the first twenty. And at about twenty miles in, Boston has something called Heartbreak Hill. It is steep and long and it eliminates more runners than any other part of the course. This is the point at which many hit the proverbial wall. Some runners simply collapse, while others manage to make it to a nearby curb before their muscles give way.

It is heartbreaking to make it to the home stretch of life only to have to battle chronic pain or heart disease or cancer. It can be deeply disappointing to hit the wall after you've worked so hard to get to this point. You want to keep running the race of faith, but that curb over there looks awfully inviting.

Now, what if I were to tell you that, no matter where you are on the racecourse today, I could guarantee that if you keep running, you will share in the winner's prize? Well, that's the glory of

the gospel—the glory of the good news about Jesus—because that claim can be made. If you run the race of life trusting that Jesus is already the Champion over sin and evil and death, then He will share His victory with you. In today’s Epistle, Paul is talking about the confidence that comes from being on Jesus’ team.

Listen again to what he writes, and bear in mind that he most likely was writing this while in prison: *8Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Paul was given strength, courage, and joy because he knew Jesus as His Savior and Champion. As he says here, the goal of his race was to be raised from the dead so he could live with Jesus for eternity. Knowing that he would be with Jesus in the future changed him in the present. It freed him to run his race with excellence, with urgency, and without fear. Paul knew that the prize of eternal life with God was already his because eternal life with God was never something he could earn or achieve. Jesus had won it already. Jesus stands at the finish line with trophy in hand, and beckons to us to run well and to run with grace, because the outcome is certain. It is true: what we know our future to be can actually change our present.

Think of it this way: there were two men who were both going to be doing the same job. It was a terrible, awful, Dirty Jobs-type of task that nobody wanted to do. Eighty hours a week, backbreaking, disgusting, menial work, and they wouldn’t get paid until the end of the year. One of the men knew he was going to be paid \$15,000; the other knew he was going to be paid \$15 million. Now, how do you think knowing that might affect the way they viewed their work? Mr. 15 Grand would probably complain, find ways to cut corners, and might eventually just quit. The fifteen million dollar worker, on the other hand, would likely whistle a happy tune while he worked. What you know your future to be actually changes you in the present.

And here’s what we know: Jesus went to the cross to pay off the high cost of our sin. Jesus disarmed death by his return to life. Jesus did these things for you so that you will one day stand in a resurrected, perfected body in full relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit in a Day of joy that will last forever. Believing in Jesus and his actions, that is what your future will be. Fifteen million dollars could not redeem one soul for heaven; but the blood of Jesus does for any who trust in Him. This is the prize you’ve already won!

Wherever you’re at on the racecourse of life, press on toward the goal to win the prize, confident that Jesus already has the victory in hand. Give your best effort to the One who gave His all for you.