

Over the past couple of weeks, college basketball fans watched in amazement as the team from St. Peter’s—a school of less than 3,000 students—made it to the Elite 8, just a few wins shy of the national championship game. The St. Peter Peacocks, with no real stars to speak of, embodied the role of the underdog with teamwork and determination.

There is something about the underdog that we find appealing. We love to hear about people who persevere against great odds. Continuing with the athletic theme, the apostle Paul compares the Christian life to a race in today’s Epistle lesson. His approach to that race is familiar to underdogs everywhere. Paul writes, “I press on.”

Wherever you are in the race of life, may Jesus Christ inspire you to press on; to never give up; to persevere in your faith and the mission he has given you.

The apostle Paul knew all about performance. In fact, in this letter, he builds his case for being the best religious person the world had ever seen. If good standing with God depended on performance Paul would’ve been the MVP.

So imagine reaching a point in your life where you would call that way of thinking “waster product.” That’s what Paul does here. He says, all of my right thoughts, all of my right answers, and all of my right actions are trash compared to the riches that are found in Jesus Christ.

Now, that’s not how our underdog stories usually go. We usually hear about the boy who would shoot baskets until after dark; the girl who stayed long after practice; about the one who studied the hardest or out-prepared their competitor. Paul dismisses his own efforts as junk, when weighed against the efforts that Jesus made to save him.

Jesus had grabbed ahold of Paul, and Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ completely shook his life. Through Jesus, Paul learned that right standing with God—and God’s love—did not depend on Paul’s performance. The promise of heaven was not a trophy Paul could earn through a lot of hard work. Right standing; God’s love; and heaven itself were all gifts! They were things Jesus paid for and gave away. This news transformed the way Paul thought about God. Where before he was zealous for religion, now he was zealous for Jesus. Where before his goal was to make himself the best he could be, now his goal was to know Jesus well—to concentrate on the power of his resurrection, and to share in Jesus’ suffering. Paul’s new way of thinking about God is revealed in the language he uses to express his connection with Christ: He talks about “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,” and of “gaining Christ” and of being “found in Him.” Paul is saying: this is what counts—connection with Jesus, the living Savior. Paul’s new goal is to live in this connection.

That’s his goal, but he freely admits that he is not 100% there yet. He is not 100% like Jesus, and Paul was not in heaven yet, either, so...he presses on like an athlete. He knows that the victory has been given to Him already. Why does he go all out? He goes all out to give honor

to Christ. “Pressing on” means moving forward in life with determination. It also implies that you don’t hold yourself back.

You can keep yourself from living the full life God wants for you by holding onto your past—the things you’re ashamed of; the things you regret doing; Maybe it’s something you said to someone you love. Maybe you cheated someone. Maybe it’s a pattern of behavior you’re not proud of. You know whatever it is.

What can we do? Paul says, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press onward toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Now, to just say, “Forget the past” doesn’t help much. First, you must realize your past sins are dead and buried in Jesus’ grave. Only then can you replace the habit of remembering the negative with something positive. Paul says he ‘forgets’ by looking ahead. He is striving toward a goal: to be like Jesus. He bends all his energies in that direction. He offers the visual of a runner in a race, stretching forward to reach the tape at the finish line. Are you putting that much effort into your relationship with Jesus?

That’s easy enough for Paul, you might think. He was a giant of the faith. What did he have to forget? Well, think about it. He persecuted Christians and put them in jail. He was there at the murder of Stephen, the gifted young deacon in Jerusalem. He spent years trying to earn God’s blessing by doing all the right things. But when the forgiveness earned by Jesus washed over him, the truth of God’s “Amazing Grace” enabled him to see the past is gone, and God’s way is forward and upward.

If you have felt the magnetic pull of God’s love and dumped your sins at the cross of Jesus, then Paul urges you in the strongest terms to forget them. Jesus paid the bill. God has forgiven you. He will not keep bringing it up again and again. There is nothing on your record. Jesus erased the strikes against you with his blood.

The way forward is to become more like Jesus. How do you do that, exactly? It happens when He speaks and you listen to what he says in the Bible, when you speak and he listens in prayer, and when He feeds you at his table in the Church. Jesus pours himself into you using words and bread and wine. It happens when you remember your connection with Jesus, which began with your baptism. Drink deeply from these sources, “stay hydrated,” we might say today, if you want to be like the one who saved you.

God’s way is forward and upward. In this passage, Paul writes, “God has called me heavenward.” God has called you heavenward, as well. Paul coaches you today to press on toward this goal with all the determination you’ve got, with confidence that you are destined to stand in the winner’s circle, thanks to Jesus. The confidence you can have in this upward call is huge. It has the potential to change your whole outlook on life, death, and what comes next.

Let me give you another sports analogy to explain this. If you’ve ever played golf, you know what it’s like to stand over a three-foot putt, and this putt is very important. You’re putting yourself under a lot of pressure to make this putt. So what do you do? You miss it, of course.

You choke. But then what happens? Have you ever done this? You take your ball and put it right on the same spot you were before and try again. What happens? You drain it. Right in the middle of the cup. Why? What's the difference? The pressure is off! You're not thinking about yourself, you're just thinking about the putt. There's no pressure, so you're free to take aim and swing. And you make it.

Do you see? Jesus has removed the pressure of the upward call to heaven. You are going there because of Him. Jesus took all the consequences of sin himself on the cross, which means you are free to live for Him. There's no fear involved. You can take aim and hit the target of a life that will please him. So swing freely. Serve with excellence. Love generously. Press on. You run for the Champion's team.