

## Break with the Past

### Philippians 3:4b-14

When I was a young woman – in my late 20s and early 30s – I heard some of the members of the congregation say they were former workers in the church, but now felt it was time for the younger people to work...for some this may have been understandable...but for most of us we need to move forward in our faith and our service to the one that has saved us. Paul say if anyone had a right to brag about former religious service...it was definitely him. If you want to compare credentials, Paul would win every time....circumcised when he was 8 days old...according to the Old Testament scripture of God to Abraham; an Israelite...he could trace his ancestry without break through each exile of his people and was found to be an Israelite on his paternal and maternal sides of the family; he was a Benjamite...from the family of the wife of Jacobs' most beloved...a family of people that Rachel gave her life to bring into the world; he was a Hebrew of the Hebrew ..... his family had kept the laws of God through the generations; he was a Pharisee...a keeper of the Law and made sure that no one else was loose or slack in its interpretation; he was a persecutor of the early followers of the Way because he believed that it did not hold fast to the laws as had been handed down through the generations. Paul was one who followed the law to the letter. If the scriptures said it...it could not possibly mean anything else, so for example...if the scriptures said one was cursed that hang on a tree...then Jesus, the crucified one could not possibly be within the will of God and was accursed! Paul was righteous under the law....like the scribe and the Levite that would not defile themselves to help

a stranger who had fallen among thieves and was left for dead. Paul was as good a Jew as he could get. From his retrospective it becomes clear how much Saul had counted on the "righteousness" he enjoyed in virtue of strict observance of Torah. However Paul said with all that...he was nothing without Jesus Christ and the power of his death, burial and resurrection. This stark contrast reveals the core of Paul's conversion: from pride in one's own achievement to gratitude for an utterly gratuitous call to an indescribable new approach of life. As much as the book of Deuteronomy may focus on observance, it continually reminds us how the Torah is sheer gift, grounded in the liberation of a slave people from their powerful masters in Egypt, and offered to them as a way to appreciate their newfound freedom by coming to respect themselves as partners with the creator of the universe, in a covenant freely offered.

Having been liberated from the need to achieve hardly leads those who have been given a gift of unprecedented magnitude to bask in what they have received. Much as the Israelites were freed from slavery to undertake the dignified role of partners in the covenant, so coming to know Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection becomes a call for "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" ([v. 13](#)). That "call of God in Christ Jesus" is "knowing Christ Jesus [as] my Lord," namely, becoming more and more like him, as we leave behind all pretense to misappropriating his gift as our own achievement. **David B. Burrell**

Paul uses personal testimony and other examples to authenticate and energize his call to action. Paul encourages the believers at Philippi to hold on to and live out core Christian values. The primary goal of faith, in Paul's view, is to know or experience Christ. Communal life is to be centered on attaining this ultimate prize. None of the identity markers that say we are

people of faith is more important than a community's heart-centered desire to know and to be like Christ.

The primary aim of the life of faith, Paul insists in this letter, is to know Christ. Believers are called first and foremost to pursue and share that "prize" with personal and communal authenticity. **Jill Y. Crainshaw**

Paul calls the reader to pursue the present situation and strive toward the finish line. He has not received the victory prize, and the final race has not been completed. In this sense, Paul does not differ from the Philippians. The action of Christ, who with the call to be an apostle to the nations has put Paul on a new racetrack. Paul was grasped by Jesus not to seize the prize on this earth, but the prize is the call of God upwards.

Paul describes the individual phases of a race that work causally, as in a competition in a stadium. It seems that he pictures us as runners "straining forward" straining toward the goal "forgetting what lies behind." Paul's past, defined by Jewish respect for the law and persecution of the Christian community, lies behind him, as well as his call and establishment of the Philippian community. The athletic a runner should not think of the distance behind, but must set his or her mind on a goal ahead. If we take ancient art into consideration, we find athletic images where a runner looks backward, suggesting that it was common to look over one's shoulder as one ran. For athletes, the finish line and the prize lie ahead, and for Paul these function metaphorically in reference to the upward call of God in Jesus Christ ([v. 14](#)).

Surprisingly we win the prize, not by coming in first, but simply by crossing the finish line. Paul suggests that there is neither an exclusive prize nor an indivisible prize to be attained. Paul says we are not just imitators, but fellow imitators! In this way, Paul moves beyond describing the group as enjoying the renown that accrues if their representative wins great honor but,

rather, emphasizes that they are running the same race that he is running, which is their common heavenly call. **Annette Weissenrieder**

Lest you think that Paul is asking you to be a supper Christian...here is a story called “Really Winning” and is told by Michael Broome in the book *Stories for the Heart*.

Every year thousands of young athletes from all over the world gather for the Special Olympics. The fanfare, the celebrities, the music, the excitement are nearly as grand as the regular Olympics. These athletes know what it means to give their best. They have trained for months and for years and want to win.

Several years ago, five finalists with disabilities gathered at the starting line. Their hearts were pounding. Each wanted to win. The starter’s gun discharged and the athletes exploded from their crouched positions and began running with all their heart. The crowd was on its feet shouting and cheering.

Suddenly one of the runners stumbled and fell flat on his face. He struggled but couldn’t seem to get up. A moan and then a hush fell over the stadium. In the next moment, another runner stopped running and reached down and helped the fallen runner back up. The two of them finished the race together.

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

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