

It's been described as the "greatest ultramarathon achievement of all time". On 22nd March Jasmine Paris, a 40 year old mother of 2 and veterinary lecturer from Edinburgh, became the first woman ever to complete the gruelling Barkley Marathons.

This is a 100 mile endurance race inspired by a prison break. It consists of 5 loops of 20 miles in the extreme terrain of Frozen Head State Park in Tennessee and includes 16,500 metres of elevation, the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest twice.

The rules are that you have to complete each lap within a certain time limit and the complete race in 60 hours. That leaves no time for sleep and so many of the runners hallucinate from sleep deprivation.

Since 1989, more than 1000 ultramarathoners have tried. But only 20 have ever finished. In a previous attempt, Jasmine missed the cut off for the final lap. But this time, she completed the course, with a time of just 80 seconds under the 60 hour time limit.

It's amazing what people can achieve when they give their best. But for some reason, when it comes to living for Christ, we often settle for far less than our best. Apathy, laziness and half-heartedness is often what our Christian lives are like.

But not the apostle Paul. He was committed to serve Christ to his best. And in our next section of his letter to the Philippians, he called each of us to do the same!

Philippians 3:12–21: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,¹⁴ I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.¹⁵ All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.¹⁷ Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now say 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 on earthly things.²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour 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."

In this section Paul taught us 3 things that we need if we are going to serve Christ to our best.

- A Correct Assessment.
- A Correct Attitude.
- A Correct Aim.

1. Correct Assessment

So first of all, we need a correct assessment of how we're doing.

We're often tempted to one of two extremes when we think about our Christian lives. Either complacency or condemnation.

- Either being proud of our progress, thinking we've arrived spiritually and living exactly as God wants us to.
- Or being discouraged or in despair, thinking that we're doing nothing right and never will.

But if we're going to serve to our best, we need to see ourselves as we truly are, to "Think of yourself with sober judgment." Romans 12:3

a) We're Accepted in Christ Now

That means we need to recognise the amazing miracle that has taken place in our lives.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul described how he'd gone from trusting in himself and his achievements, to trusting in Christ alone for salvation. As a result, he was confident that through the finished work of Christ on the cross he'd received, "The righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." Philippians 3:9.

And if we've put our trust in Jesus, then we too have been made righteous in God's sight.

- We've been fully forgiven.
- Adopted into God's family.
- Indwelt by his Spirit.
- We're accepted in Christ.
- And our lives have been radically transformed.

b) We'll Be Like Christ One Day

And one day, that transformation will be complete. Paul was eagerly looking forward to the day when God ["will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."](#) Philippians 3:21

If we've trusted in Jesus, then we can be sure that one day, God's work of salvation will be complete.

- We'll fully enter into the victory that Jesus won for us on the cross!
- We'll be transformed to be like Christ
- And our battle against our sin, sickness and death will be finally won.

c) But We're Not Perfect Yet

But until that day, none of us will be perfect. ["Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect."](#) Philippians 3:12

- Paul was an amazing evangelist, disciple-maker, church planter, Scripture writer.
- He had a great knowledge of God's truth.
- And had experienced God's power and presence in remarkable ways.

And yet, he knew that he wasn't perfect.

- He still had truth to learn.
- He still needed to be transformed.
- He still struggled with sin.

And that's true for all of us, no matter how long we've been walking with the Lord. John wrote: ["If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."](#) 1 John 1:8

- None of us have arrived spiritually.
- None of us are living a sin-free life.
- None of us have entered into the fullness of our salvation.

There is a real encouragement in this, because clearly God doesn't need us to be perfect before he can work mightily through us! If God could use Paul in his imperfection, then he can use us in our weaknesses and struggles! As God said to Paul, ["My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."](#) 2 Corinthians 12:9

But there's also a challenge. If we're going to move forward and serve Christ to our best then we need a divine dissatisfaction!

- Yes, we can rejoice that we're accepted in Christ today.
- And we can rest that we will be like Christ one day.
- But we also must recognise that we still have a long way to go! None of us are perfect yet.

This is the correct assessment of our lives. We're all a work in progress.

2. Correct Attitude

But what should our attitude be to that process? Well, Paul already told us that God is committed to continuing and completing it. ["He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."](#) Philippians 1:6

a) Press On

So does that mean we can just sit back and wait for the transformation to occur? Not at all. Paul didn't, "Let go and let God". Instead he said, ["I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."](#) Philippians 3:12

This image comes from a military pursuit of one army by another. It describes a single-minded attempt to reach a particular goal. Paul was committed to increasingly becoming everything that Christ saved him to be.

The power to be transformed comes from God. It's the power of the Holy Spirit that changes us, cleanses us, that makes us more like Jesus. As we saw earlier, ["It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."](#) Philippians 2:13

But we're not to be spectators in this. Instead we're to be partners with God. To be single-minded, wholehearted, focussed in seeking to

- To work out our salvation,
- To grow in our faith,
- To know Christ more,
- To become more like him.

b) Forget the Past

And to do that, we need to be [“Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead.”](#) Philippians 3:13.

70 years ago, England’s Roger Bannister was the first person in the world to run a mile in under 4 minutes. 6 weeks later John Landy of Australia broke that record by a second. So in August of that year when these two runners competed in the same race for the first time, the world was watching.

Landy set a fast pace early in the race but with 80 metres to go, Landy looked back over his left shoulder to see where Bannister was. But in that second, Bannister overtook him on the right and went on to win the race.

A bronze sculpture of the race-deciding moment was later placed outside the stadium. And Landy is quoted as saying, [“When Lot’s wife looked back she was turned into a pillar of salt. When I looked back I was turned into a pillar of bronze!”](#)

Looking back can make the difference between winning and losing in a race. It’s the same in our Christian lives. If we’re going to move forward we need to forget the past and strain towards what is ahead.

That doesn’t mean we should forget everything that happened in our lives. We can learn from those experiences. We should thank God for how he’s worked through them.

But we must not live in them. We must not be controlled or ruled by our past.

- Either our past failures, because that would prevent us from living in the freedom and forgiveness we have in Christ.
- Or our past victories, as that would lead to complacency or pride and hinder us from depending on God for the grace we need today.

c) Focus on Obeying What We Know

But we don’t just get distracted by our past. We can also get distracted by what we don’t know.

Of course, learning God’s truth is crucially important. Paul was confident that if we humbly seek to learn, God will reveal his truth. [“If on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.”](#) Philippians 3:15

But Paul was keen that we don’t put all our effort into just learning new truth. Instead we need to, [“Live up to what we have already attained.”](#) Philippians 3:16

Growth isn’t only about understanding doctrine, it is also about living out God’s truth – about putting it into action! [“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”](#) James 1:22

So just because we don’t have all the answers to all the theological controversies being fought these days doesn’t mean that we should delay living out what God has always revealed to us. We need to put into practice what we know to be true, as we seek to grow more in God’s truth!

d) Follow Good Examples

But we don’t just learn from reading God’s Word. We also learn from living with God’s people. We need people around us to imitate, learn from, be encouraged and inspired by. But we need to choose carefully who we allow to influence us in this way.

There are many around us who set a dangerous example. Paul was grieved to remind them that, [“Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.”](#) Philippians 3:18

It’s not clear who Paul was meaning here, but whoever they were, Paul passionately warned his fellow believers not to follow their example.

Instead Paul said: [“Join with others in following my example.”](#) Philippians 3:17 As an apostle, Paul knew that his role was not just to teach truth, but also to provide an example for people to follow.

Today we can also follow his example. But we also need to look for people around us today that we can follow – people [“Who live according to the pattern we gave you.”](#) Philippians 3:17.

So this is the attitude we need. To press on,

- Forgetting the past
- Focussing on obeying what we know from God’s Word
- Following the example of others who do the same.

3. Correct Aim

But if we're going to serve to our best, we need one more thing. Paul said, "I press on towards the goal." Philippians 3:14. Paul had a clear goal in mind. He knew where he was heading – and so he was sure he was going in the right direction.

We also need to fix our eyes on the correct goal. We need to know where we're heading. We need to have the correct aim in our lives.

a) The Right Place

That means we need to fix our eyes on the right place.

The enemies of the cross had their aim on earth-bound things. "Their mind is on earthly things." Philippians 3:19. Their whole attention, point of view, their way of looking at things was based on what they could get out of this life!

Also, "Their god is their stomach." Philippians 3:19 They were ruled by what they wanted. Their aim in life was the satisfaction of their personal appetites and desires.

And so their values and morals were all wrong. "Their glory is in their shame." Philippians 3:19 They celebrated what they should have been ashamed of, and ridiculed what they should have honoured.

But if we've trusted in Jesus, "Our citizenship is in heaven." Philippians 3:20 The city of Philippi was a colony of Rome, so its citizens were classed as citizens of Rome even though it was miles away. Their lives and conduct were to be worthy of this citizenship. They were to live as if they were actually in Rome.

In a similar way, we are citizens of heaven, even though we live on earth. Heaven is our eternal home. Heaven is where we belong.

Today we can experience a taste of this in the presence, power and peace of God in our hearts. But heaven should also be the place we're aiming for. It should be our focus and our goal. We need to "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Colossians 3:2

But this doesn't just mean we should long for heaven. It also means we should live in the likeness of heaven! Our behaviour should be appropriate for someone who belongs there. We should live "As aliens and strangers in the world." 1 Peter 2:11

That doesn't mean we should step back from getting involved in this world. Instead it means that we live in this world with heaven's priorities. In our lifestyle, morals, values and attitudes we should live on earth as if we are in heaven!

And we should give ourselves to things that are of eternal significance:

- Press on to be all that Jesus saved us to be.
- Devote our lives to loving people.
- To sharing the gospel.
- To seeing God's kingdom grow.

b) The Right Prize

And if we're going to do this, we also need to fix our eyes on the right prize.

The enemies of the cross were heading for disaster: "Their destiny is destruction." Philippians 3:19 This is the tragic consequence for all those who live for themselves and their own satisfaction.

But Paul was aiming, "To win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:14

This prize included his final transformation. As we saw earlier, God will "transform our lowly bodies." Philippians 3:21.

Paul told Timothy that he was also looking forward to, "The crown of righteousness" 2 Timothy 4:8 – experiencing the fullness of the righteousness that was given to him when he trusted in Christ.

But maybe Paul was also thinking of the reward that Christopher was speaking about a couple of weeks ago – the reward of a faithful servant when their master will say: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Matthew 25:23.

And with this comes the honour of further opportunities to serve and honour God: "You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things." Matthew 25:23 Paul was aiming to receive the prize of God's best for him!

c) The Right Person

But more than anything else, his aim was on the right person.

The enemies of Christ were living for themselves. Their lives were heading for disaster because they lived selfish and self-centred lives. As Jesus said: [“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it.”](#) Matthew 16:25

But Paul was living with his eyes on Christ! [“We eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”](#) Philippians 3:20
This was his prize. Not so much heaven as a place of beauty, wonder, safety and satisfaction. But heaven as the place where he would be with Jesus, this risen and glorified Saviour.

Conclusion

This was Paul’s goal. And this is what kept him pressing on to serve to his very best, despite how tough things got. This is what kept him from apathy and half-heartedness.

- He had a **correct assessment** of his life: he knew that although he was accepted by Christ and would one day be like Christ, he was not there yet!
- He had a **correct attitude** in his life: he was determined to press on to be all that Christ saved him to be.
- And he was able to keep on going right to the end, because he had the **correct aim**: he knew that his place was in heaven, where he would receive the ultimate prize, of knowing the person of Christ in all his fullness. And that would be worth it all!

So what about us? Are we willing to do the same? Are we willing to serve our Lord to our best? Are we willing to press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of us?

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