

## JOY WAY

An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul

TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by

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CHRISTIAN LITERATURE CRUSADE Pennsylvania

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

#### A SPORTING INTERLUDE - *Philippians 3:12-16*

HERE is this master of illustration at it again, drawing his lessons this time from the Sporting Arena - either, as he is writing from that city, the Roman Stadium; or, more likely, as the readers would know it better, from the Greek arena of the Isthian Games. He naturally begins with -

#### THE START OF THE RACE

**"I am apprehended of Christ Jesus"** (12). How well we know the story of the morning and manner of his arrest on the Damascus road - that was what started him on the Christian race.

He was quick off the mark, as all successful athletes must be; for it says that **"straightway he preached Christ"** Acts 9:20. It seems a mere cliché to say that we must begin at the beginning; we cannot barge into the race some laps in front of the starting-point, just wherever we like.

Yet, there are folk who do make this mistake. They imagine that to begin the Christian life they must do good things, turn over a new leaf, try their hardest, make solemn promises - all good in their right place, after the race is begun; but the start is at the point of CHRIST'S grasp of us in grace, and our grasp of Him by faith.

Do you remember in John Bunyan's immortal allegory that the Christian way opened at the little Wicket Gate - picture of our Lord JESUS, who said, **"I am the door: by Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved"**, John 10:9; and how that two men, Formalist and Hypocrisy, thinking they knew better, instead of going right round to the starting-gate, climbed over the wall, well ahead of where they should have begun. They were, of course, disqualified.

Have you started yet? You say, "I go to church" - fine. "I read my Bible" - good. "I say my prayers" - excellent. "I live a decent life" - of course. "I try to help other people" - splendid.

I can imagine Nicodemus claiming all this, and more; but, as we saw in an earlier study, our Lord told him he had not started yet, John 3:7. Have you started?

Many of my readers can remember their "**Damascus Road**" - the place where CHRIST met them, the living JESUS arrested them. Sometimes, that "road" has been a strange place - in my own experience, one was under a street lamp-post; another was literally on a rubbish-heap; another was on a seat on Liverpool Street Station, in London. Others, of course, have been in ordinary places: church, chapel, hall, drawing-room, open-air meeting.

Where was your starting-place? How Paul loved to tell of his conversion - dwelling on all the details, amazed at the forgiving love for sinners, "**of whom I am chief**", I Timothy 1:15. So he was "**apprehended**".

It was CHRIST who took the initiative - pricking his conscience, Acts 9:5, pursuing him along the road, like Francis Thompson's "*Hound of Heaven*", persuading him with the urgency of the telegraphic double-knock, "**Saul, Saul!**"

No, he could not get over the wonder of it all. When Hebrews 12:1-2 talks about the Christian Race, it speaks of the Lord JESUS as "**the author and finisher of our faith**" race. I wonder if we are, on account of the context, justified in interpreting that as "the starter and judge" - fulfilling a double role, sending us off from the mark, and welcoming us at the tape.

A double role would be nothing foreign to Him who is both GOD and man, who is both High Priest and Victim. Anyhow, in fact, even if not in these words, He is both Starter at the beginning, and Judge at the finish. So Paul is off!

### **THE COURSE OF THE RACE**

He had not yet finished - "**not as though I had already attained**" (12).

Later on, we find him within sight of the tape, and, in glad anticipation, he says, "**I have finished my course**", II Timothy 4:7; but he is not yet there, he has still a long way to go. From the superior manner in which some Christians behave, you might imagine that they had got there - it appears that they have nothing more to experience, nothing more to do, nothing more to learn: they know it all!

They remind me of a boy of fourteen, who, explaining why he had left school, told me, "They can't teach me any more". Perhaps he spoke more truly than he meant - not that he was so full of knowledge, but that he was so dull that they had given it up.

He intended the first: I suspected the latter!

Our apostle had no such delusions - there were gaps yet to be bridged, laps yet to be covered; there were depths of experience yet to be sounded, heights of attainment yet to be achieved, ere the close of the contest.

Meanwhile he would not stop still - "**I follow after**" (12). It is now almost universally questioned if Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews; but of this there is no question, that he would heartily endorse the sentiment of 6:1, "**let us go on**". He had fully and firmly grasped the

fact that conversion was, as we have seen, a starting-place, not a stopping-place.

He would have appreciated that, though the seemingly impassable, impossible, Red Sea be in front, the command still holds, "**Go forward**", Exodus 14:15. There is a place for "**Stand still**" (verse 13), but no room for standstill - need for quiet, to get new vision, but only for the purpose of preparation for the resumption of the journey.

This race is not just a sprint - a quick, brisk burst of energy, and done with.

In that case, many more would have succeeded. It is the distance that has beaten; they could have managed a spurt; but the keeping on keeping on has proved too much for them.

Says Hebrews 12:1, it is a long-distance race - "**let us run with patience**". Says Galatians 5:7, it is an obstacle race - "**ye did run well; who did hinder you?**"

Here, in Paul, is an athlete who will not be hindered, not be stopped, but will "**go on unto perfection**".

He would put everything into it - "**This one thing I do**" (13).

There is no "I do" in the Greek, so that the broken sentence recaptures the excitement of the apostle in his prison as, in imagination, his heart is pounding at his ribs, as his feet are pounding on the track. He has one over-mastering passion, to the exclusion of all other interests - to get there, and to get there fast.

I will not say, to get there first - because I think that this is not a competitive race.

Mark his concentration. "**Forgetting those things which are behind**" - no race could be successful for a contestant who was continually looking back. Old sins - "**their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more**", when they are pardoned; why, then, should we be for ever digging them up, and pining for them?

*Former failures* - how discouraging they can be; don't be for ever doing nothing because you were once doing badly. Learn what lessons your failures can teach you, and then forget them.

*Past experience* - some people are perpetually living on the past; they received a great blessing, perhaps at Keswick, years ago; let GOD be thanked for that; but, alas, these folk never seem to have any fresh, up-to-date blessing to recount.

*One-time pleasures* - that, for whatever reason, they have felt urged to renounce; but they are, so wistfully, often thinking back to those jolly times of yesteryear.

Like Israel of old - "**we remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: but now . . . there is nothing at all, beside this manna**", Numbers 11:5-6.

Some Christians, who once were so happy with "**this manna**", have allowed their appetite for

the things of GOD to be spoiled, and now they look back to the old days and pleasures.

To all such we would say, "**Remember Lot's wife.**"

*Previous successes* - these also should be forgotten, for it is ever a temptation to be content with that triumph, to rest on our oars. What a lot of things there are, bad and good, for us to forget!

The Psalmist says, "**My times are in Thy hand**" - leave your past time there; and know that "the best is yet to be."

Ponder this, too. "**Reaching forth unto those things which are before.**" Have you ever seen a runner, straining every nerve to maintain, or increase, his speed? There he is, at full stretch!

That is the picture here. Grasping every opportunity of service, that he may do all he can for GOD, ere the race is done; seeking to make progress in grace, ever advancing in the things of GOD, that He, our Divine Trainer, may not be disappointed in His proteges; eagerly anxious to step into all the promises of blessing, longing to apprehend all that GOD purposed in apprehending him (12).

Here is a runner in dead earnest; here is running that makes big demands.

The other classic racing passage, Hebrews 12:1-2, gives sound advice to those who would "**run well**" - amongst other tips, these.

(1) "**Let us lay aside every weight**" - this last is a medical word, making the phrase to mean, "let us get rid of every ounce of superfluous flesh", which is just what an athlete does, training down to the last ounce, or, in spiritual parlance, reducing the "I" to the least minimum, as little of self as must be.

(2) "**Let us lay aside . . . the sin that doth so easily beset us**" - that doth so easily wrap us round. The athlete is careful to throw off everything that he decently dare, so that no vestige of unnecessary clothing shall impede him. How often a Christian's progress is slowed down by some besetting (wrapping round) habit of sin.

(3) "**Looking unto Jesus**" - not looking back at the past, as we have seen; not looking round at others. Like Peter, "**What shall this man do?**" and JESUS' reply, "**What is that to thee? follow thou Me**", John 21:21-22. Our attention wholly given to Him: what is His will in everything? What will please, and honour Him? All that need be added is the word Paul sent to the Christian athletes of Corinth, I Corinthians 9:24, "**So run, that ye may obtain**", which brings us to -:

## **THE END OF THE RACE**

**"I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."**

The apostle is now looking toward the finish of the contest, the scene at the tape is, in anticipation, before his eyes, those last few yards call out all he has in him.

Let us divide up this interesting sentence, and examine it piece by piece.

"**The mark**" - On first thoughts it seems easy to interpret it as referring to the tape at the end of the course, at whose breaking the prize-winner will be known and acclaimed. That is the way in which it has been mostly understood. But let me put to you a suggestion which has been brought to my notice by A. Cochrane, my old friend. In an old commentary of more than a hundred years ago (1839), by a Dr. MacKnight, the following suggestion is offered, "I follow in the course along the mark", and, by way of interpretation, it is added, "I run on the marked-out course of faith and holiness."

Mr. Cochrane proceeds, "So Paul says, in effect, I am pressing on towards the Prize to be given when the Race is finished and won, and I keep to the marked-out Track, as I must, for the rules must be followed.

**'If a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully'**, II Timothy 2:5. It is the only way, and do you follow my example, and that of others, who do as I do. He must keep pressing on along the marked-out Track." A most interesting suggestion.

If you have attended an athletic meeting, you will have noticed how the track is marked out with lines for the Hundred Yards, and how each competitor is allotted his lane, and is bound to keep within those two lines of his track. That track is symbolical of the "**narrow way**", Matthew 7:14, the Way of Faith and Holiness - we cannot go where we like, we must keep to the appointed track, or we become "**a castaway**", I Corinthians 9:27; turned out of the race, not turned out of the family.

"**The prize**" - it is not competitive, for if I get it, the others are not deprived of it, as in an ordinary race, wherein "**one receiveth the prize**", I Corinthians 9:24.

In the Christian race, all may receive it if they "**so run**." Paul doesn't despise the prize - as some affect to do. These superiors say that they do not race, work, serve for reward. Who does? It is "**the love of Christ constraineth us**", II Corinthians 5:14. But that does not mean that we will think lightly of it, if we are awarded it. Our Lord Himself often, shall I say, recommends it, Luke 19:17; Matthew 25:21.

Who am I to despise it? The apostle was not ashamed to go all out for it. Paul doesn't describe the prize - we know that

- (a) it is not Salvation, being given only to those who have previously got salvation;
- (b) it is not Heaven, for that is not a prize for our effort, but a gift to our faith.

Let us be content to leave it as yet revealed. At least we do know what will be the gracious words that will accompany the presentation - those words, all the more heart-warming as coming from His lips, "**Well done!**" It is always an encouragement to get that bit of praise from anyone, but how incomparable the sweetness when coming from Him. That will be worth all the sacrifice, all the striving, all the strenuousness. GOD help me - help you - so to run as to obtain that distinction, Heaven's medal of the "W.D.": "**Well done!**"

"**The High Calling**" - I have long felt that this means "the upward calling", and that it refers to the time of our Lord's return, to call His church up to Himself, as prophesied in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

It would appear that it is at this dramatic occasion that the judgment seat of CHRIST - the examination of believers' records - is to be set up, in accordance with I Corinthians 3:12-15, when "**reward**", and "**loss**", shall be assessed.

I have quite recently discovered that my view of this is not new, as I impudently imagined, but that actually it was held by no less a person than Chrysostom, all those centuries ago, who remarked that "athletes are not crowned in the race course below; the king calls them up and there crowns them".

At the close of our English football Cup Final, the players of the winning team are called up to receive the Cup, and both teams the medals, from the hands of the Queen, or other High Personage, who has been watching the match from a box above the tiers of seats below. So was it at the Athenian Games, that the Philippians would know so well, that the successful competitors were called up to receive their amaranthian crown from their Ruler's hands.

So, we believe, will it be at the time when our Lord returns. Those who have gained the prize will have "*the upward calling*", to receive from His hands the token of His grace and pleasure, and to hear, His wondrous commendation, "**Well done**" - perhaps, also, the delighted plaudits of the assembled saints. The Parousia will be our prize-giving! Oh, happy day-if we have "**so run**".

"**In Christ Jesus**" - yes, again comes the so-oft repeated emphasis, all is from Him, and in Him. It is His grace that gives us the urge, and the chance, to run, as we "enter" the race by the "**strait gate**"; it is His grace that gives us strength to run, and even guidance to run well; it is His grace that gives us the prize for good running.

He was the "**Author**" - the Starter who sent us off; He is the "**Finisher**" - the Judge who holds out to us the incorruptible crown at the end. Therefore, as the old hymn invites and incites us -

"Run the straight race, through GOD's good grace,  
Lift up thine eyes, and seek His face.  
Life, with its way, before us lies,  
CHRIST is the Path, and CHRIST the Prize."

Verily, in Him is our protection, our provision, our progression, and our preoccupation all the way along. Thus, as we saw earlier, we shall run "**looking unto Jesus**" for everything needful for our Christian athleticism - what more inspiring motto could we have. One further section of the passage now claims our attention. I shall call it.

### **THE LAGGARDS OF THE RACE**

Perhaps we might first consider the "**thus minded**" of verse 15. Those who share the same mind with Paul on the matters he has been placing before them. He claims for such that they are "**perfect**".

You will notice that he has already used the word in verse 12 - only, in that verse, he is thinking of final perfection, "**not as though I . . . were already perfect**", as though he were at the perfected end, he would have no patience with the idea of "sinless perfection" in the present sphere; while, in verse 15, he is speaking of the perfection of the intermediate stage.

Of a little baby child you exclaim, "Isn't he perfect?" Yes, for his age and stage. You meet a fine, clean, healthy, upstanding fellow, and you remark to your companion, "Isn't he a perfect specimen of young manhood?" Yes, for his age and stage: but he has a long way to go yet - unless he grows, he will not be counted perfect of adult middle-age.

You come across an old gentleman, kindly, unselfish, helpful, wise, sunny - and someone says, "What a perfect old dear." Yes, for his age and stage. Down again on the running-track, final perfection of the sprint is, let us say, one hundred yards in ten seconds. (As a matter of fact the time has been reduced by a decimal point or so; but let us, for the illustration, abide by the ten seconds.)

You stand with stop-watch in hand, and you gauge him at ten yards in one second-perfect: not final, but stage, perfection. So he goes on, perfect at each ten yards' stage; for until, at the end of the hundred yards, he has reached final perfection at ten seconds.

So is it with the New Testament, it is relative.

When our Lord says, "**Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect**", Matthew 5:48 - He does not mean that we are expected to attain Divine perfection; but that we are to be perfect in our sphere, and stage, as GOD is in His. If, then, we are to be of such a mind, we shall have to be always at full stretch - no lingering, no loitering, no lagging behind!

Now for the "**otherwise minded**" of verse 15. These are the laggards of the race.

They have not the same mind as Paul about it all; they just don't agree with him. Why all this hurry and energy? They are in the race - why worry? They expect to get there in the end. It is all very well to be a Christian; but why overdo it? Hold yourself in; don't make yourself an uncomfortable nuisance to other people - whose unsatisfactory life will be shown up, if you are too religious. Church, yes - but no open-air meetings, no tracts, no prayer-meetings, no personal tackling, no narrow-minded taboos.

How shall we deal with such laggards? The apostle tells them, "**God shall reveal even this unto you**" - that is, will show you how well-worthwhile the "all-out" Christian life is, and what a mistake they make who "go slow"! Rather, let all His athletes not be content with what they have "**already attained**" (16), but carry on with the same rule, and mind, until the Happy Ending.

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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