

## **Philippians 3:1-4:1**

### **Run for the Prize in Spite of Potential Dangers**

If I ask you to describe Christian journey of faith with the help of sports, what would you say? Some say it can be basketball, some may say sailing, some may say running. Interestingly enough, one can find many parallels with any type of sports. I suggest for this morning we take running or jogging.

Christian life does look like a marathon. And believers are to pace themselves to run through the whole distance.

We are in a race already. It started with our confession of Jesus. On that day God has started “the good work” in all of us. And since then we run. We are “working out” our salvation. And we see others running. Everyone runs for a reason. In every running competition there is a prize at the end. And our passage today speaks about 3 groups of runners, but only 2 of them are opponents. In any competition, you are to study your opponent. In running race as well. Opponents’ goal is not to let you finish the race, to get your eyes off the distance, not to win the prize. We may say that there are some traps or dangerous places on our way prepared by the competitors. Imagine, we stand in the middle. One group is on the left, another on the right. let us study our opponents, let us see the traps on the way to the prize and the ways to avoid them and to see how it corresponds with our lives and ministry.

#### **1. Philippians 3:2-11 The Group which is Running Backwards**

**Description:** I suggest that we look at the 1<sup>st</sup> part of our passage, vv. 2-11. Paul is affectionate about describing this group of people. By using strong metaphors, he balances the lack of body language which he would use if he was present with us. This words “evil doers, dogs”: in other words he is saying “o man, how don’t you see that you are wrong”.

The list of advantages: circumcision on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, belonging to people of Israel, to the tribe of Benjamin, to Pharisee group draws a portrait of heavy-weight champion or well-known famous and popular sportsman. (*pose as body-builder*)

We already have to be scared from one look at such group of people, group of sportsmen. This is our first group of opponents. And I suggest looking at it as if all of us run with our faces to the finish line, all the runners in our passage they look in one or the other way at the Messiah, the Promised Saviour to the world. But there is something unique about each group.

**Potential danger:** This group I would suggest that they are running backwards. Interestingly enough, they are running in the wrong direction. They look at the finish line, but somehow they run backwards. This group describes the trap of being distracted by minds of others, the mind of traditionalism. We see here how this group can be constantly leaning towards past victories, protecting the memories about those victories, comparing and denying everything new. So we may summarize this group as traditionalists.

The trap of traditionalism may be found in student ministry. What worked before, is not bringing much fruit today. You keep doing events, for the sake of events, for the sake of traditions. And not letting new experiences be tried out. Or it can mean holding to memories of a “golden age” of this approach: oh, you know in 1980 something this project impacted such and such number, so why don’t we continue doing it.

The trap of traditionalism is about forgetting what traditions symbolize and what they stand for and admiring the tradition for the sake of tradition.

In our spiritual race it’s like this group comes to the starting line of the race and leaves it, showing to all others “what are you trying to get? We already have it. We already have the prize”

**Overcoming this danger:** In our passage Paul followed the model of Christ from 2 chapter. He reviewed all his advantages in life and considered them nothing. And he pressed on forward to get to know Jesus more. That was his answer to the traditionalists, that was his approach how to avoid the trap – to get to know Jesus more and to let others know about him.

Paul advises to avoid this trap by knowing Jesus when talking with traditionalists. On one of my trips on the plane I talked with couple of Muslims. Sooner or later we started talking about religion and that Muslims are right in perceiving Jesus as the prophet and evangelicals are wrong. I agreed with them that in Eurasia, evangelicals are different from traditional religions: Islam and Orthodoxy. They said that if you are born local, you belong to the local religion. I said that a person needs to experience personal encounter with God. And one Muslim said: what do you mean personal encounter?

This is exactly what Paul talks about. Traditional religions may have the advantages of being allowed to wear their special clothes in public or to be present in universities, but nothing will substitute the personal deep encounter with Jesus.

*TRANSITION:* So we looked to the group on the left. The next part vv. 12-16 is the central part of the chapter. And central, important part usually deserves more attention. Sometimes you can put more emphasis by speaking about it at the end. Therefore, so let us do so and come back to 12-16 later, and now turn to vv.17-21.

## **2. Philippians 3:17-21 The Group which is Running on the Spot**

**Description:** In vv. 17-21 Paul describes the 2<sup>nd</sup> group of runners and here he again uses passionate language. “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame”, “they are enemies of the cross”.

This group of runners can be described as running on the spot. So they seemed to begin racing, but then they started running on the spot. And they admire the glory of spectators, they do participate in the race

And the key features are: why worry, life is so good now, past is in the past, future is unknown, present is the most important thing.

And to me this group of people reminds the famous fable or cartoon about Turtle and Hare, where they raced each other and the rabbit constantly paused and relaxed, thinking I have time. And the small turtle was patiently moving on the race and at the end, won the race.

**Potential danger:** This group of people symbolize the trap of materialism. And it is connected to abusing the citizenship. As Paul described we do have heavenly citizenship. And so we are to live now as we would live in the future. In the country I live, in Kyrgyzstan, sometimes I see people on the streets who have 2 citizenships: usually it is Kyrgyz and Russian. Once I've overheard a conversation of 2 men. One was asking the second one: why are you here in Kyrgyzstan? You have Russian citizenship, go to Russia and find a good work there. The second one replied: I will do it whenever I want. I am good enough for now. ^That dialogue made me think about myself. I also have 2 citizenships: I am a citizen of heavenly kingdom, second – I am a citizen of country, named Kyrgyzstan. And what do I do with these 2 citizenships: do I use them to the full extent, up to maximum power the new life God gave me or do I feel good enough to be saved eternally and not caring at all about others in this world?

The trap of materialism can take place in student ministry. "Thirst is nothing. Image is everything" says the commercial of one popular soft drink. Students tend to take it seriously. Image is everything, focusing on what cell phone they have, what they wear, how they are perceived by others because of this. It starts with small things (computers, bike, etc) and can continue with better job, better salary, better house. These things are good in themselves, but our human nature tends to fall into trap of considering them the most important or the top priority thing. "If I only had this new cell phone, I would feel more accepted by those with whom I want to share the Gospel". "If I only had a better job I would have more resources to give". Does it sound familiar? We might receive our "piece of glory" for some time, but then new demands come into the picture. The world always wants more than you have. We may fall deeper into the trap.

**Overcoming this danger:** And Paul is asking to avoid this trap of materialism by love.

He is like saying: consume the love of Christ, never be satisfied about it, be always thirsty for the love of Jesus. Interestingly, chapter 3 does not say a word about love. Chapter 3 presupposes that friends of the cross understand it. People do need to hear that drinking of Christ satisfies the inner thirst more than any of physical things.

Love of Christ can be gentle, and can be tough. Some may overcome the danger of materialism through Bible talks and discussions about priorities and values. Some may benefit from practical things and projects where you show practical love to others, putting somebody's interests above yours. And finally some may have their eye-opening experience only you openly confront them. I don't know how it exactly works, because it is all God's work.

*TRANSITION:* So we looked at the 2<sup>nd</sup> group of opponents, on the right. And finally we can talk about the 3<sup>rd</sup> group of runners: is this us?

### **3. Philippians 3:12-16 The Group which is Running Forward**

**Description:** This is the only group which is running forward. And the key feature of this group that they are pressing forward. They run together as one. In Phil. 1:27, the phrase has the image of running, athleo, contending as one man together, not as opponents. We ran individually and corporately at the same time. Paul supports this concept of unity and personal example at the same time, by usage of pronouns "I, we" (over 30 times), and "they, we" over 40 times.

Another characteristics of this group is that they look forward to get the prize and interestingly enough. What is the prize? What is the prize for finishing the race? When talking with people from different religious background, we touch upon the topic of heaven and people ask “what would be there”. There are different descriptions of what the believers would receive as the reward for living here on earth. Paul says that the prize for all the Christians would be Christ himself. What?! What are you talking about? After all those sufferings on this earth, I would get Jesus. Come on!

But that is what the treasure and the beauty of the Gospel. One author said “We might know about many people who lived over hundred years. But know only 2 of them on a deep personal level. And ^that is what Gospel suggests knowing at a deep personal level. Be known by Jesus and to know Jesus in response. That’s the prize. That’s the treasure. That’s the beauty in itself. To live the whole life full of circumstances and to get the meaning of it, presense of Christ and the knowledge that you are not alone in everyday’s battle for living for Christ.

Let me unpack a little bit, what does it mean to receive Christ as prize in the book of Philippians:

1. To be saints in Christ (1:1) = in Him we would be saints in the full sense
2. Lord Jesus Christ (1:2) = have you ever thought that your prize would be the Lord Jesus?
3. Until the day of Jesus Christ (1:6, 10; 2:16, ) = He is like a finish line, without Him nothing would come to an end.
4. Suffer for His sake (1:29, 30; 3:7, 8) = sufferings would stop when we get the prize
5. His name is above all names and every knee will bow down (2:9, 10) = what a prize!!!
6. Surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (3:8) = prize is eternal, it will not be covered with dust on a shelf.
7. 3:10 to get Christ as prize means to know Him and the power of resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings
8. 3:21 transformation of our bodies

**Potential danger:** Great prize. It is great to be part of this group. And you might think that there are no dangers here. Oh, well, there is. It is a temptation to skip the suffering, not to suffer. You all suffer. Every one of you has faced the challenge to suffer for Christ and has experienced the temptation to skip it.

Can you imagine that for some Christians students in Eurasia to suffer for Christ may mean to sit through all classes during the day and not to skip one and be mocked by their groupmates for that? Can you imagine that for some Christians students in Eurasia to suffer for Christ may mean not to pay bribes to their teachers in University in order to get a grade? Can you imagine that for some staff-workers in Eurasia to suffer means to serve students at the risk of being rejected by their families, being persecuted by the government, mocked by the society.

Can you imagine? Yes, we can. Because we face the same challenges in one or the other way. And the danger is to do it our way, to help God to do this ministry, through a short-cut, skip the suffering and as a consequence skipping the opportunity to testify God’s power in action.

**Overcoming this danger:** the way to overcome this danger is helping each other to know Jesus deeper in every circumstance of life and ministry. It means that we are to be

transparent with each other about challenges, doubts, fears. It means that we are to ask for help when we are in need. It means asking our students, our staff “How are you? What’s going on? What help is needed?”

On youtube last year there was a popular movie clip about running competition where at the end one runner got confused right before the final 100-foot corridor and almost took the different turn. And the runner after him told him and directed to the finish line. By doing this he didn’t win, he let his opponent be better. That’s the image of this 3<sup>rd</sup> group, running towards Jesus and helping others to avoid getting into traps.

And while looking at you, my brothers and sisters, my heart rejoices because I see all of you whom God has called to know Jesus, to know his greatness, his love through reaching students in the universities through the roles you have. You are working out your salvation, you are following Jesus in your joys and sufferings. So may God help you to avoid the traps in your running and receive the prize, which is Christ. Amen.