

Text: Philippians 3:12-14

Theme: Rounding the Last Curve

March 13, 2016

Picture this scene. You are standing in the starting blocks for the 400 meter race. The starting gun sounds and the race is on. As you picture yourself leaving the starting blocks, which curve in that race is most important? Curve 1, 2, 3, or 4? Every experienced runner knows that the curve that matters most is the final curve. In our text, Paul's imagery remind us of a race, the race of life, and like running the 400 meter race, it's the last curve, the curve most of us are in at this moment that matters most.

I. In the eyes of our God, we are rounding the final curve of life's race. A. Yet the last curve poses its share of challenges. 1. One challenge is that we are prone to look over our shoulder. In the 400 meter, what will happen if you look over your shoulder? Will you gain speed or lose speed? The moment a runner looks over his shoulder, he loses speed. Life's race is no different. That's why Paul says, "Here's what I learned to do in my race. I learned to forget the past." Isaiah reinforces Paul's words as he says, "Forget the former things. Don't dwell on them." Sounds simple enough; sounds like a no brainer, yet, we all know that forgetting isn't as easy as it appears.

2. Another related challenge we face is lingering regrets. Look at Peter. After Peter denied knowing Jesus, how many minutes went by before he began to regret his actions? Did he even get an hour of silence before his mind attacked him? Coupled with forgetting is this matter of regrets. It's tough enough to forget, but when those regrets arrive, it makes our race even more challenging. "How could I have done that?" "Why did I do that?" "I can't believe I did that!" Sound even a bit familiar? As we're rounding that critical curve in life's race, regrets attack us as the devil uses his cunning plan to slow our race, to get us to step off the track all together.

3. We can also add to our list the ever increasing number of obstacles. Have you noticed? When we were young, the race appeared simple. No hurdles, no clutter on the track, no obstacles. But now that we're older, the race appears different, doesn't it? Health hurdles, pain obstacles, aging clutter. Our simple race now possesses an abundance of complications. Once it appeared easy to round the last curve to the finish line, but over time, the last curve has accumulated so many challenges that it's often difficult to find the finish line amid the obstacles. It's not how we planned the race or expected the race to turn out, but it's reality and it's unavoidable.

B. Since we are faced with so many challenges, how do we round the last curve? 1. We round the last curve by refusing to dwell on the past. The past is in the past. We know the obvious, but that doesn't make it go away. Paul provides encouragement as he says, "Here's what you must do; this is the only way to round that critical curve. Forget what is behind; push it out of your memory. Keep replacing it with the present and the future. Do whatever you must, but whatever you do, you must not allow your mind to live in the past, to return to the past. You must teach it to live in the present and anxiously anticipate the future. Be like the runner who can taste the finish line as he rounds that last curve!"

2. We round the last curve by increasing our determination. I need you to return to the era when your kids were little. How many of you can remember your kids

fighting to stay awake when they were beyond tired? As we round that last curve, we need their determination. When we want to quit, we tell ourselves, "I must keep going; I must press on. If I stop now, I will miss the crown!" Call it stubborn, but whatever you call it, Paul says, "Just do it. Get up when you stumble. Maneuver the obstacles; clear those hurdles. You can do it. God will give you the determination needed. Depend on Him and run until you arrive at the goal line."

3. We round the last curve by straining forward. When a runner is straining forward, are they standing on the track with their hands crossed, staring at the next obstacle, looking twenty feet ahead as they jog down the track, or running like a wolf is chasing them? The imagery here is incredible. In life's race, the wolf is coming out of the woods heading our direction. As fast as we can run, faster than we ever knew we could run, we are clearing those hurdles and running toward safety at the finish line. We're not thinking about running; we're simply doing it. That's straining forward, leaning into the race. That's how we round the last curve in life's race.

4. We round the last curve by remembering the crown. What motivates a runner to run at top speed? Would you run 400 meters as fast as you could for a snicker's bar, for an ice cream sandwich, for a piece of bubble gum? In life's race, our motivation is the crown, our eternal crown, our eternity with Christ in heaven. Surrounded by obstacles, clutter, and hurdles, Paul says that we need to keep our focus on the crown, to win the prize, the prize Christ obtained by His death on the cross in our place. Praise God that He created that crown, that He sent His Son to make that crown possible for if there were no crown, we would never finish the last curve of the race.

5. We round the last curve by sticking to the race. How many runners win if their heart isn't into running? Paul says, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize." What's he telling us? He's saying, "Stick with it. Don't give up even when you get weary, even when your race appears to have more obstacles than anyone else's race, even when you think you can't get to the finish line. You must finish. Your entire life depends on this race!" And Paul is exactly right. Your life, my life, our lives depend on this one race. You can lose all the other races. You can be laughed at as you run, but when you win this race, you will have won the only race that matters.

6. We round the last curve by following our Coach's example. What's the purpose of a track coach? It's to get you to the finish line, to show you how to be the best you can be. Jesus, as our Coach, has a unique coaching strategy. Instead of telling us how to run, Jesus stepped onto the track, ran the race all the way to the cross as He fulfilled His mission, died there as our perfect example, and three days later, rose from the dead and said, "Now run like the wind. Run the race I have marked out for you, the race I guarantee you can win. Clear those hurdles. Get to the finish line by following My example. If I can do it, you, with My help, can do it!"

7. In any race, it's the last curve that matters most. So as you leave this place today, run life's race like you mean it. Round that last curve because the crown is waiting for you only at the finish line. Amen.