

THE FOCUS OF THE FAITHFUL ONES

“I do not claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself. Of course, my friends, I really do not think that I have already won it; the one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above.” (Philippians 3: 12-14; GNT)

Olympic athletes are amazing individuals. What impresses me most about them, are the discipline, dedication and focus that are needed to even make it into these games. For years, the sportspersons have been training every day to get the opportunity of this one competition. Of course, other championship athletes and any people who want to reach somewhere in their professions, do also need to be determined and to persevere. To reach high goals does not come overnight. What is true in so many areas of life is also true of our most important pursuit, which is to reach a vital relationship with God. The apostle Paul often used examples that were taken from Olympic sports. In this Scripture passage, he spoke about how he was “running a race” for Christ, and used this as a role model for his readers. Out of this, we can learn that in order to grow as Christians; we must be purposeful. Our salvation is granted to us by grace and applied by faith, alone. Nevertheless, when we want to grow spiritually, we need to do something for it. This takes another dimension, which Paul even calls “working on our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2, 12). In chapter 3, 10.11 Paul wrote: “(...) that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” This means:

- a) He wants to know Christ in a personal and practical way.
- b) He wishes to experience the power, freedom and joy that come when we live in the light of Christ’s resurrection.
- c) He aims to identify with Jesus’ suffering and death. This way, he hopes to gain divine peace that passes human understanding.

These are Paul's goals. In the Scripture on top, Paul gives us some guidelines to how we can focus on our spiritual growth.

God has a goal for our lives

Paul wrote: “I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself.” He understood that the Lord had a goal in mind for his life. Romans 8: 28.29 says: “We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose. Those whom God had already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son, so that the Son would be the first among many believers.” Do you see how God is purposefully calling us? He wants us to be transformed into the likeness of His Son. Why is this important? First, because God does not only want to “get us in the door”. He is not merely aiming to save us, but is working to “remodel” us. As Christians, we say we follow Jesus. This means, we give our best to learn from Him. While we do so, God gives us grace to increase in what is of Him, and this way, we are being sanctified. Secondly, our transformation into Christ-likeness is important to God because He needs us to become the workmanship in His kingdom. He has an individual heavenly call for each one of us to serve Him with our gifts. We are a part of His plan. Through it all, God will lead us to joy, fulfilment and eternal blessing.

We have not arrived yet

Paul not only recognized that the Lord had a purpose for his life, but he realized that he had not arrived at that purpose, yet. He was aware of his need to improve in what he was doing to serve God. Before he had met Jesus, as a very ambitious orthodox Jew of his time, he had actively persecuted the Christians. Now, he found himself on the other side of the scene. In 1st Corinthians 15:9, he wrote: "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

The word "perfect" also means "complete". When we want to be made whole, we need to have in mind that this is a lifelong progress. Some Christians feel discouraged when having the impression they would not change rapidly. Nevertheless, God is very patient to give us time so that we can develop into spiritual maturity, gradually. As we can observe in nature, growth takes time.

Our goal is to become more like Christ. We aim to change in our thinking, attitudes, conversations, actions, and in our relationships. We desire to love Him ever more. Then, we will be useful in His hands.

We do not live in the past

Paul recommended that in order to be able to focus on our inner growth and the purpose God has for our lives, we should not dwell in our past. He did not mean we should forget about anything. Certainly, we should remember who we were before Christ found us. We should continue what was good in our lives before we met Christ and our lifestyle and cultural imprint that is adaptable with Christian values. Nevertheless, there will always be some experiences, habits or dependences that can hinder us to move on in Christ. This is why we need to avoid abiding in them in the future. If we have wronged or a problem with someone, we should try to reconcile, or at least, forgive. Otherwise, we will cling to the hurt, and this can cause us to be emotionally unstable. How we deal with the painful times of our past, will determine how we live in the present. What God has washed away by the blood of Jesus, we should never take it as a burden, again. In addition, we should not idolize our past successes. Otherwise, they can keep us from pressing forward to what God has in store for us.

We keep our eyes on the goal

Some of humanity's greatest contributions have come from people who decided that no sacrifice was too large and no effort too great to accomplish what they had in mind.

Paul used the picture of running a race and aiming to win a prize. When today during the games, Olympic athletes reach their limits, they imagine what it will be like to stand on the platform and hear the national anthem of their country being played. The famous Jesse Owens (1913- 1980) won four gold medals in the Olympic games of 1936 in Berlin/ Germany. He won the 100-meter dash and broke the Olympic and world records for the 200 meters. His broad jump record lasted for twenty-four years. What had motivated him? He told his story that when growing up in Cleveland/ USA, his family was "materially poor but spiritually rich". One day, the successful athlete Charles William Paddock (1900- 1943) came to visit his school. He was at this time considered "the fastest person alive", and he told the children: "Listen! What do you want to be? You name it and then believe that God will help you be it." On that day, Jesse Owens decided that he, too, wanted to be the fastest person on earth...

Often, we begin a diet or start exercising, and never follow through. We read a book, but never finish. In many areas of our lives, we give up too easily. This can even concern careers or marriages. Spiritually when it comes to following Christ, it can also happen that some of us have a good start but don't remain in it. Maybe we are detracted because of considering our old lives

to give us an easier satisfaction of desires. Maybe, we feel offended by other Christians who measure us with their standards when we still need to take first steps in changing our lives. Where do we stand, today? Are we truly and wholeheartedly committed to Christ?

Jesus wants us to be people of visions who give their best to build God's kingdom and improve our surrounding society. COVID-19 is reminding us that there is no security on earth, but rather, we should seek what is of God. I must admit I never really considered how important the work of all these wonderful professionals like virologists, epidemiologists and system immunologists is. This is why I never remembered them in my prayers, too. Today, I have become very grateful about their expert knowledge and ambitious work. They do not always agree, but they think twice, discuss with one another and while considering their different perspectives, diligently try to find out how the virus operates. Out of this, they develop ideas how people can protect themselves, and they give advices to the politicians who then have to decide what arrangements they can implement.

At the moment according to a worldwide nation's ranking presented by Spiegel and ZDF magazine, for example¹, Germany comes second after Israel and is followed by South Korea in how effectively we have fought COVID-19. I believe this has a spiritual meaning: Israel is the Land of the Bible and of the people of God. Germany is the land of reformation, and in South Korea; there is the current largest church of the world. I think this shows that our spirituality can change the atmosphere so that even atheist scientists or politicians operate in godly manners. On the other hand, to some extent we also depend on them especially in these days, so we should pray for their work and decision making processes.

As Christians, we often have the tendency to use our Scriptures to interpret what is going on in the light of the end times. But what good comes out of this? It can only teach us that God is in control and we should continue serving Him and witnessing to world in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. In the midst of a pandemic of his time, Martin Luther said: "If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today!" Let us stand together in love and unity to pray and glorify Christ! Let us touch heaven to change the earth and prepare ourselves as well as the people around us for the second coming Jesus, the Saviour of the world!

Prayer: Father God, you are the One to Whom our hearts are opening, and no secret is hidden before you. Our eternal redemption is in your hands. Have mercy on us in the areas where we have come short of your glory! Grace us with your heavenly wisdom and knowledge to learn from this crisis. In your eyes, all humans are the same, but in this world, we don't have the same chances. Help us to bridge the differences and create equal rights and justice. Let your divine love and peace lead us into your saving arms! In Jesus' mighty name we have prayed; amen.

Greetings and blessings,
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¹ <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/im-laender-vergleich-liegt-deutschland-sehr-weit-vorn-a-ebae15df-eca1-4daf-ae5b-8efcad11ee28>