

You and I live in an age where if there's something you want to do and you can read, you can most probably do it. For there's plenty of experts out there writing plenty of books to tell us how. You know the *how to* books. The whole dummies series. *Microsoft Word for Dummies*. *How to fix your car for Dummies*. *Dieting for Dummies*. (Or is that *Dieting's for Dummies?*, I'm not sure)

Here's are some other titles I came across in the *how to* range: *How to Clone a Sheep*. *How to Build a Rocket*. *How to Split an Atom*. Couldn't find one on how to write a sermon. Some others: *How to Stop Being Depressed*. *How to Control your Child*. And the biggest part of the *how to* section? How to make money! You know if you do a Google Search on how to make money it comes back with a massive 192 million searches.

Now why are there so many *How to* books? Because there is a market out there. People want to improve themselves. They want to get somewhere in life. So if Paul was writing this passage today as part of his range of *how to* books you might entitle it "*how to stand firm in the Lord*". Or *standing Firm for Dummies*.

That's why he ends our passage in chapter 4:1 by saying "*Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!*" Friends it is not easy to stand firm in the faith. Thousands, millions of people who currently go to Church will fall away. So how can we avoid being one of them? Well let us turn back to the Phil 3:12, for firstly it comes down to

**1. Self Help.** Yes, self help. We have to do something ourselves about standing firm. We have to press on. We need to take hold of. We need to forget what is behind. We need to strain toward what is ahead. We need to join with others in following the example of the apostle Paul. We need to get off our backsides.

And the illustration Paul is using is that of an athlete, that of a runner. Not a sprinter, more a marathon runner. Someone who goes into hard training. Someone who gets himself or herself physically fit and emotionally balanced. Someone who will run toward the finish line, who will finish the race and who will earn the prize. So just as the athlete puts in an enormous effort before & during the race, so if we want to know how to stand firm in the faith, we must be willing to put in a similar type of effort.

So what sort of self help does the athlete need to possess? Paul says they need to do three things and the first one is we need to be dissatisfied with the past. As Paul says in verse 13 "*It's not that I have already obtained all this, or have been made perfect.*" Looking back, he says, I know I can't yet rest on my laurels. I know I haven't performed up to my Coach Jesus instructions. I am currently dissatisfied with what I have achieved so far in my life. So "*one thing that I do is forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead.*"

So Paul tells us that the first thing we have to do to stand firm is to have a correct self assessment of what has happened so far in life. For none of us have arrived as yet. We may have been running the race for 50 years or for 50 days, but none of us have yet reached the prize.

Looking back then means that we will be dissatisfied with our lives up to now. For we are all sinners. Each day we let our great God and Saviour down in hundreds of ways. Our actions fall short of the mark. Our devotion is luke warm. Our gaze is easily distracted. Our passion waxes and wanes. Our faith is oh so weak. We are not the people we should be. We have not responded to God's gift of eternal life with the thankfulness and the gratitude that should have swelled up inside of us.

The first step is to be dissatisfied with your sin. But it's more than that isn't it? We look back at the despair that overwhelmed us when life didn't turn out the way we wanted it to and how we were caught up in that despair for weeks, months, longer than we should have been. And how we were hurt by that person's thoughtless words and how we harboured that grudge for months, or for years. And how we stubbornly refused to allow God's word to change our lives, we didn't allow Him to come in and mould us more into his image.

That's why we need to confess those sins and then forget what is behind us. For if we are a Christian those sins have been forgiven and forgotten by Jesus. He died on the cross to get rid of those stains from your being. So don't live in the past. Don't go over that hurt. You are crucifying your Saviour all over again.

But it's not just forgetting your sins, it's also not holding onto our triumphs either. For in the context of this passage we see from earlier in the chapter that Paul was letting go of his spiritual heritage, his zeal as a Pharisee, his own acts of righteousness. For these actions of his were rubbish, garbage in comparison to knowing Christ. These things helped fuel his pride and that took his eyes off Jesus and onto himself. So if we are going to know how to stand firm we need to forget what is behind us.

We need to be a bit like the Spanish explorer Cortez. For when Cortez landed at Vera Cruz in 1519 to begin his conquest of Mexico with a small force of 700 men, he purposely set fire to his fleet of 11 ships. His men on the shore watched their only means of retreat sinking to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. With no means of retreat, there was only one direction to move, forward into the Mexican interior to meet whatever might come their way. Thus in paying the price for being Christ's disciple, you too must purposefully destroy all avenues of retreat. Be dissatisfied with your past. But also be directed toward the future.

That is why Paul tells us to "*forget what is behind and strive toward what is ahead*". That is why he encourages the Philippians "*to press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*". That is why he urges us to have our citizenship in heaven. To await a Saviour who is coming from there.

We need to have our eyes on the prize. We need to direct the focus of our life toward the future that God has in store for us. We can't afford to be distracted by the good things that God has placed all around us in this life. For this place is not our home. We are pilgrims heading for eternity in heaven.

And unless we have the direction of our life set, we can easily just wander all over the place in any old direction. Unless we have Jesus as the compass in our lives, we could end up lost and far away from God's will. Unless we can focus on where we are going, to a place of God's eternal presence, we will be tempted to stop and be satisfied with our homes, cars, computers, friends, families.

So it's a matter of dissatisfaction, direction and finally *determination*. To be determined that in the present that we will work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We will press on. We will not quit.

The picture in my mind that best illustrated this truth is the mental picture I have of Robert De Castella running the Commonwealth games marathon in Brisbane in 1982. You may not remember that race but De Castella was the favourite, but early in the race, two Kenyans broke free from the pack so quickly that no-one could follow them. The pack just hoped they had left too early and they wouldn't have the legs. But well after the half way mark it was obvious that these guys were strong, that indeed they did have the legs to go all the way and they weren't coming back to the pack.

The pack had to go to them. So De Castella took the lead in the pack and began chasing them down. His body was sore, his legs were aching, his mind was telling him to stop, but with grim determination he forgot the past, he focussed on the prize and he forced himself forward. And just before the end he caught the Kenyans, he passed them and he won the gold medal.

Now Australians hate quitters, don't they? They don't respect someone who starts something but when the going gets tough, decided to give up. Well God hates quitters too. For friends none of us have yet made it, none of us have arrived. And so in the same way that the athlete is dissatisfied with past performances, directing their attention to their goal and determined to reach it, so we need to work even harder as we strive for godliness.

But don't forget we are not doing these things *to achieve* our salvation. No Paul has already made clear that Jesus Christ is the one who has already done that for us. No we do these things *to work out* our salvation. But it's not just up to us. It not just a self help book, because Paul also wants to direct our gaze away from ourselves to others that are in the same race as we are in. He wants to talk not just about self help, but fellowship help.

**2. Fellowship Help.** For we are not just a lone athlete trying to reach the prize by ourselves, we are in the midst of a group of athletes, a pack of athletes whose aim is to reach the end together. That is why Paul says in verse 17 "*Join with others in following*

*my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."*

We are not alone. We are not travelling to heaven by ourselves. There are others amongst us. And that is why God has put us together in Churches. So we need to follow Paul's example as he runs. And we are to take note of those whose who live according to the pattern of the Scriptures.

Why? Because not everyone does. Not everyone who says they are a Christian is providing you with a good example. Not everyone within your Church, our Church is worth emulating. Paul says, and he says with tears in his eyes, some live as if they are enemies of the cross of Christ.

How can you tell if someone is a good example or not? Well let's look at what is a bad example to follow. Verse 19 says, "*their destiny is destruction.*" Some people's lives are not only destructive in the short term, but they are heading towards everlasting destruction. That would not be a good person to follow.

Paul continues "*their god is their stomach*". Their appetites dictate their lives. They do what feels good. Which means they are worshipping themselves and their feelings and their desires instead of God. They are at the centre of their lives and following someone who is self centred is a dangerous business.

"*Their glory is their shame.*" Their values are upside down. They are happy when they should be ashamed. And they are ashamed when they should be happy.

And lastly "*their mind is on earthly things*". They are too earthly minded to be of any heavenly use. They are concentrating on the created things not the Creator. Whereas our attention needs to be on our great God and Saviour. We listen to Him. We value what He values. We are obedient to His ways.

As the author Don Carson once said "*So look around carefully, & emulate those who are continuing to grow spiritually, not those who are stagnating. Beware of those who project an image of smug self-satisfaction. Imitate those who keep on imitating Christ* Yes there is a place for self help, for fellowship help but ultimately standing firm is

**3. Really about the Saviour's help.** We don't just press on, we take hold of the prize which Jesus has already won for us. We don't just follow Paul's example, we follow Him as he follows Christ. We don't just think about the here and now, we eagerly await a Saviour who will bring everything under his control.

For the salvation we have received is based wholly and solely on what Jesus did for us. And the righteousness that we now seek and which we will stand on the final day, similarly is a gift to us from God. It is given to us through Christ. It doesn't ultimately come because we have worked hard for it. It comes because we received it by faith.

As the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 12, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith”*

Jesus then is both the author and perfecter of your faith. Jesus helps get you to the starting line and he will ensure you get to the finishing line. The most important thing to remember then about how to stand firm is not what you do, it is to allow Jesus to apply what he has done deep, deep, deep into your life.

To change the illustration a little, it is a bit like a cyclist. Yes he has to train, yes he has to watch what he eats, yes he has to focus and be determined and look forward, but that ultimately will not determine victory. And yes it is great if he rides in a pack, if he sticks close to others who are heading toward the same goal because then they can slip stream one another and pull one another on. They can encourage each other when the going gets tough.

But ultimately making it to the end, is about riding a tandem bicycle with Jesus. He will be strong even when we are weak. He will be determined even when our morale flags. He will keep peddling right to the end, he has already won the prize in effect, all we need to do is stay close to him.

It is a bit like what happened recently. Our family found this wonderful park in Palm Beach with all this great play equipment, but going around the outside was an object that was a little bit like a train, but it was a tandem train which was powered by two sets of pedals. So at one time Jemma and I got on this train. And we both started to peddle. By herself she could get nowhere, together we rocketed around the track.

Similarly it is only by our Saviour’s help that we will get to heaven. Yes we are called to peddle, yes it helps to have others around us, but ultimately it is useless without what Jesus does. For in the end the righteousness in which we stand on that final day, although we have been busy working out our salvation with fear and trembling, is not our righteousness but Christ’s. It comes from him to us as a gift. It was not won by our strenuous efforts but it was appropriated from Him by faith.

Well friends, the race is on. The prize is in heaven. In a few moments we will leave this building and start jogging, but how are we going to go? I don’t know! All I know is this passage reminds me that some of us aren’t going to make it. Some of us see this as a fun run and when the fun stops so will they. But if I am to make it, I have to give it 100% & I will need your help. But ultimately I can’t do it without Jesus. He is the author and the finisher of my faith and yours as well.