Saul thought he had it made, spiritually. He did the right things, played by the rules, fulfilled the expectations of everyone around him; but he still felt spiritually dead inside. Saul’s frustration and suppressed rage built up inside him, and he lashed out at this new sect called “Christians.” Saul, the *uber*-righteous Pharisee, hunted down Christians and turned them over to the authorities. His fanaticism drew praise from his fellow militants, but it did not make him any happier. Quite the reverse: the more he learned of Christians and their simple, joyful way of living, the more he wondered what was missing in his own life.

Paul’s bitterness built to a crescendo of misery until he heard the voice of Jesus, asking “Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul came psychologically and spiritually unglued. Three years later, he was back, a changed man. Wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, Saul, the feared persecutor of Christians, became Paul a true follower of Christ! Years later, he wrote words which conveyed the secret of how to get spiritually unstuck: *“…forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*” (3:14). Paul gives us a formula for living a victorious Christian life: Forsake the pull of the past *(“forgetting what lies behind”*); Overcome the inertia of the present *(“straining forward to what lies ahead”*); Listen to the call of the future*(“pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus”*).

**Forsaking the Pull of the Past.** Sometimes the past is our worst enemy. We all have pasts with terrible, painful things in them. Things we would rather not remember. Things which, despite our best efforts, come back to haunt us. Blessed are we when we can set that past pain aside! In the book, *Out of the Blue*, famous baseball pitcher Orel Hershiser shares the secret of his success. Throughout his career, Hershiser cultivated a peculiar focus as he ascended the pitcher’s mound. He would concentrate on the next pitch, and the next pitch only. He could not afford to worry about bad pitches he had thrown or the bad calls the umpire made in the past. The only thing that mattered was the next pitch he would throw.

Like Hershiser, we do well to give our full attention to each day or task as it comes. Yesterday is over and done. We cannot change what happened. Tomorrow is not yet here, so there is no sense in wondering what might be. Just imagine what we could accomplish if we direct our energy to one day, and one day alone, without fretting about the past or worrying about the future. Now imagine that day is today! Forsake the pull of the past.

**Overcome the Inertia of the Present.** Paul uses the familiar image of a footrace when he speaks of this as “straining forward to what lies ahead.” Visualize a a runner throwing his chest forward as he crosses the finish line. To run a footrace is to battle the physical force known as inertia. With each impact of his foot on the track, with each heaving breath, the runner moves closer to the goal.

Just as there is physical inertia, there is also spiritual inertia. There is a fine old theological term for the spiritual inertia of the present: “sloth.” We tend to think of sloth as laziness, but it is more than that. Sloth is a kind of virus of the soul that keeps us from focusing on that which brings life and meaning.

Kathleen Norris is a Presbyterian elder who writes extensively about her spiritual journey. When Kathleen’s husband got cancer and needed constant care, and her aging father needed more support than her aging mother could give him, Kathleen moved back to her native Honolulu to help. She wrote about that experience:

“I could generally meet my responsibilities as a caregiver to my husband and my dying father, and help support my mother, but I felt dead inside. I dreaded waking in the morning, and sometimes went straight from bed to the couch, where I would watch television or do crossword puzzles until it became absolutely necessary to rouse myself to action. The hateful ‘noon-day demon’ of the desert monks had found me in the lush environs of Honolulu, and made me unable to respond to the beauty of the planet. I was a far weaker soul than I cared to admit, a person pathetically subject to the sin of sloth. We often think of sloth as a harmless form of physical laziness, and joke about how long it’s been since we vacuumed the carpet. But sloth is much more than laziness. It is an inability to concentrate on serious matters, and profound weariness of soul.”1

Kathleen learned it was all about her inability to focus. She felt pulled in so many different directions: so many chores to do, so many people who needed her help. She slipped into a kind of passivity, able to do only the bare minimum of what needed to be done. Like Norris, the inertia of the present robs us of our ability to focus. A kind of paralysis overwhelms us. We become passive, weak, disabled; all because our attention is fragmented. We lose our ability to *press forward to what lies ahead*, sitting back and letting life wash over us.

**Listen to the Call of the Future.** So,Paul urges us to“press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:14). Casting aside past regrets and breaking free from the inertia of the present, the spiritual challenge is to open our hearts to the voice of God, who is beckoning us into the future. The French Jesuit scientist and theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, wrote: “The whole future of the Earth, as of religion, seems to me to depend on the awakening of our faith in the future.” That is a very forward-looking notion: awakening our faith in the future! Yet, how easy we fall into the mode of fearing and distrusting the future! Especially times of rapid change, it feels right to hold onto the comfortable, the familiar, that which we can control.

But Paul is talking about *listening to God’s call*. God’s call is to a life now that leans into the promised future kingdom of peace, justice, mercy, and grace. This is the prize awaiting the athlete at the end of the contest: the trophy, the olive wreath, the heavenly crown. God’s call comes to us from the future, always the future, never the past. It beckons us to leave our comfort zone and strike out in entirely new directions. There is always an element of risk to moving out into the future, but the rewards can be great.

There is a true story about American POWs in a German camp during World War II. Unbeknownst to the guards, the prisoners scraped together enough electronic components to build a makeshift radio. They kept it tuned to the BBC. One day, news came of the German high command’s surrender to the Allies. The war was over, although that word had not yet reached the camp guards. Instantly, a change came over the prisoners: one that, to the guards, seemed incomprehensible. The prisoners sang, waved at the guards, smiled, and shared jokes over meals of watery soup and stale bread. Four days later, the prisoners awoke to find the guards gone, leaving the gates of the camp wide open as they fled. At long last, their captivity was over. Their life changed during those past few days because they heard of something sure to happen in the future. That future promise affected their present condition, changing their attitude for today.

Our future is filled with promises: the promise of faith; the promise that God is not finished with us yet; the promise that one day all that is now blurry will become clear; the promise of new and eternal life in Jesus Christ. We hear those promises and believe them to be true, which is why we can get up from those places where we so frequently feel stuck and move forward with confidence. To the eye of faith, God is always doing a new thing, and it is always a new day!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to trust in Your will over my own, knowing that Your plan is infinitely better than mine. Thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, in whom I have new and eternal life, and for Your Spirit who dwells within me as I navigate life’s uncertainties. I pray for your continued presence in my life, asking in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Note:** Kathleen Norris, “A Case of Soul-Weariness: Plain Old Sloth," *The Christian Century*, January 11, 2003, 8-9.

**Always a New Day**

Sunday, April 3, 2022 [Isaiah 43:16-21](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+43%3a16-21&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Philippians 3:4b-16

One day a man prayed: “Dear God, I’ve been good today. No grumpy thoughts. No swearing. No crabbing at the kids. No cross words to my wife. No whining about work, or the yard, or the car. But I’m about to get out of bed, and I‘m going to need your help to get through the rest of the day!” Do you ever have days like that? The days when the effort to get out of bed and face the day is so tremendous, that you are not sure you will succeed?

The prophet Isaiah is speaking to people who are having this kind of life. He writes: “they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (43:17). Israel is a defeated nation, and her people are exiles in Babylon. They are spiritually stuck, mired in spirit and despairing without a way forward. But it does not have to be that way, says Isaiah: “*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*” To press home his point, Isaiah weaves a powerful vision: “*I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert*” (43:18-19). Isaiah pictures the exiles marching triumphantly home along a broad new wilderness road, slaking their thirst from swift, clear-flowing rivers, know that it is God who cares for them, God who provides for them, and God who declares they are captives no more!

Isaiah’s advice for the exiled Israelites (and us) is to not be so small-minded in our thinking about God. Our lives are never broken beyond God’s ability to repair them! Our days are never so bad that God cannot redeem them. We serve the wilderness roadbuilder, the river-wrangler, and the desert gardener! There is always a way forward with God if we are bold enough to take the first faltering steps.

**Press On!** Today’s epistle lesson is a guide to such a determined, resilient journey. In Philippians, Paul speaks with stunning honesty about the pitfalls in his own spiritual life and how he overcame them. On the surface, his pre-conversion life (as Saul) looked pretty good: *“If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless”*(3:5-6).