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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## A Rabbit that Won't Break

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ AUGUST 19, 2018

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### One Day at the Dog Track

It happened one day at a dog-racing track in Florida, similar to the one that is our near-neighbor off Bonita Beach Road. As an afternoon crowd lounged in the grandstand, the gun went off for the fourth race of the day. A dozen greyhounds with numbers on their flanks shot out of the starting gate in hot pursuit of the mechanical rabbit. But suddenly, without warning, the rabbit came to a dead stop. Its mechanism had broken; it was frozen in the middle of the track. And the poor hounds didn't know what to do! They stopped their running and circled the mechanical rabbit. They sniffed it (it was odorless). They tried to eat it (it tasted terrible). They were at a loss. What are we supposed to do when the rabbit stops?

I know that dog-racing is not the favorite sport of most of us. And in spite of official inspections, we all hear the rumors that the dogs may be mistreated at these tracks. But the reality is that greyhounds—a remarkable species bred for 300 years specifically for the purpose of running long and fast—are actually happiest when they are running. They love to run. Their muscles feel the tingle of joy when they're racing. And as an added benefit, they receive their meals and their baths and their rubdowns as a reward for running their races. So, to their limited brains, running is their sole purpose in life. And when the rabbit breaks down, it's confusing and catastrophic for them. Greyhounds need that rabbit to constantly stay out in front of them, so that they can do what they're supposed to do.

There's a little bit of greyhound in all of us. There is something that motivates and energizes each one of us to get up in the morning and

start our own running. The specific “rabbit” may vary among us, but we all have one. There’s nothing more confusing or frustrating than having the rabbit we’ve been chasing break down. Even when we achieve a long-sought goal, it can, ironically, lead to depression. Now what? Once I’ve scaled this mountain, which one do I climb next?

## **Introduction to Scripture**

I want to read to you some words written by a man who was extremely successful in his chosen field, but who discovered one day that his rabbit had broken down. These are words of autobiography and intimate confession. The man’s name is Paul. Listen to his story, as he tells us about the rabbit he was chasing that failed him, and how he found another rabbit that would never break down.

**I**f anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

<sup>7</sup>But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ... <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection ... <sup>11</sup>Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

from Philipians 3

## **The Man Whose Rabbit Broke**

Let me give you a quick thumbnail biography of this man whose name has gone down in history as one of the all-time greats, whose impact on the Christian faith, human philosophy and world literature has been incomparable, and whose name has been attached to world-class cities and great cathedrals in his honor. Who was he?

He was born with a brilliant mind and a high energy level into a blue-blood family. His parents straddled two worlds: they were successful, well-connected business people and also pillars of their church, the Jewish synagogue. Their son Paul had plenty of options before him. He could pursue success in the world of business and politics in the Roman Empire; or he could pursue excellence at the first-rate universities of Greece (one historian has estimated that if Paul had turned his energies to philosophy, he would have surpassed Plato and Aristotle); but instead he chose to climb to the top of the religious hierarchy of his day. He studied at the finest schools as the star pupil of the most renowned teacher, he made a name for himself early among the elite, and was quickly considered the rising star among the dominant political and religious party of his day, the Pharisees. Paul was on a fast track to the top.

And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, his rabbit broke down. He came to a shocking realization that everything he had been pursuing with all his might was worthless. He discovered that the whole religious system that had consumed him, with its emphasis on gaining favor with God and holiness by following rituals and laws, ended only in failure. He and his colleagues and all the people he had taught could never be good enough. And the day Paul's rabbit broke was the day he found a new rabbit, one that would never fail him. He met Jesus Christ personally. Now he had a whole new, fulfilling, eternal reason to live. He summed it up in these simple words: "I want to know Christ" (Philippians 3:10)—not just know **about** Him, but **know Him intimately** and **forever**, and serve Him completely in this lifetime.

### **Chasing the Rabbit**

While Paul's example is certainly a dramatic 180 U-turn, he's not the only one who had to find another rabbit to chase. For the past 2,000 years, men and women have been discovering the same thing the great Apostle did. Every one of us was created by God to need a purpose. A purpose sustains us, keeps us going, giving us courage when times are hard and discipline when we're tempted to be lazy. We

need a purpose greater than ourselves, to which we can dedicate our lives. We need a cause that is high enough that we will be willing to resist the selfishness and narrowness of our human nature and rise above it to accomplish something of lasting worth. Just as God has created the greyhounds with a need to run, and just as they are happiest and most fulfilled when they are running; so he has made men and women for a purpose. But we need to be sure we're chasing the right rabbit, not one that will let us down and fail us.

Let me tell you the story of a man named Don Williams, one of our contemporaries, whose personal U-turn is described by Bob Buford in the book *Finishing Well*. Williams was CEO and Chairman of Trammell Crow, a huge real estate development and investment firm based in Dallas. Trammell Crow is one of the largest property developers in the world, with 30 offices in North America and many branches overseas. It has done thousands of partnerships, and today lists on its website divisions for office buildings, industrial buildings, shopping centers, hotels, residential units, airports, hospitals and student dormitories. In the mid-'90s Don Williams and his company were on the fastest of tracks. He was working 80-hour weeks, juggling numerous balls in the air, trying to nail down deal after deal.

One winter week found him negotiating complex international partnerships that took him to Paris, then Riyadh, then Dubai, and then India. He was scheduled to return to Paris for his flight to New York (and then home to Dallas to prepare for his next board meeting). But flight delays and cancellations took him on a roundabout trip through Cairo and Moscow before reaching Paris. As he landed in New York, an hour late, he had to dash to another terminal at JFK to catch his flight to Dallas. The shuttle buses outside the terminal weren't running on time. Concerned that he'd miss his flight, Don began to run across through the crowded roadways lugging his laptop and suitcase. Suddenly he hit a patch of ice and went sprawling in the middle of the road; a taxi had to swerve to barely miss him.

And in that moment of exhaustion and pain, the knees of his suit-pants ripped open on the slushy street, spread-eagled in front of

traffic, he had his awakening. “What am I doing with my life?” He picked himself up, went in and rescheduled himself for a flight the next day, took a taxi to a hotel and tried to sort things out. As he stood in the shower, washing the gravel out of his knees and the weariness out of his bones, he realized that it was time to redirect his life. The next day when he got to DFW he went straight home, rather than to his office. He told his wife that he was going to start going to church with her every Sunday, and would start being at home for dinner times with their teenagers. He then called his secretary and began to rearrange and simplify his insane schedule. Don Williams found that the “rabbit” of pursuing only career success could not last. He has since brought a balance to his life that allows him to be a true family man, a dedicated Christian, and an effective volunteer leader for multiple charities. Rather than personally closing every deal, he shifted his focus to mentoring and encouraging the people who are today the chief officers of Trammell Crow. That’s why I think of him as a modern Apostle Paul.

How many others have come to a moment when their rabbit broke? Only God knows. I suspect that there are more than a few people on Wall Street who have discovered this. One recent blog, by a woman who had risen in a decade to a high position at Merrill Lynch, contains a familiar lament. A top student, she had graduated *summa cum laude* from Yale with a math major. She had always wanted to go to medical school, but a campus recruiter from Merrill lured her away with promises of multi-million dollar annual bonuses. How could she turn down that kind of cash? Now she’s 33, she’s made and spent a lot of money, her job has been eliminated, and there are no jobs anywhere on the street at her level. Is it too late, she wonders, to go back to med school and resume her dream? She’d been chasing the Wall Street rabbit, and suddenly it stopped.

### **Finding an Eternal Purpose**

A man I have known, who I’ll call Ron, sold his company in his late 50’s at a huge profit and decided to retire early. Little did he realize that his retirement party would turn out to be the day his rabbit broke

down. He told himself this was what he'd been living for: *leisure*. But something within him couldn't be content to just do nothing.

So Ron worked relentlessly at his golf game, and got his handicap below 10, but that wasn't enough—especially when his back ached. He and his wife visited a dozen countries they'd never seen before, but each time he felt a quiet relief upon returning home from the rigors of travel. He ran for a local political office, but after three years on the school board he'd had enough of the pettiness of the unions, the administration and the parents—so he dropped out of politics.

Then a friend invited Ron to join a Bible study with him. Ron had never done that before, never really given much thought to God except at the holidays of Christmas and Easter. But a whole new, vast, invisible and exciting world of the spirit began to open up to him. He found way more in the Bible than he ever thought was there. He found real friendships among Christian brothers who could talk about anything together with mutual understanding. He got excited about learning and growing. He found a new purpose in giving his volunteer time to help build the Kingdom of God. He discovered a deeper love for his wife and his family than he had never known.

Slowly and gradually—much more slowly than the Apostle Paul—Ron found a rabbit that wouldn't break down. Bit by bit there unfolded to him new reasons to live, a new purpose to motivate him. Ron had expected that his final decades would be the best of his life because he would have more material comforts and more time for leisure activities. He's since discovered that these are his best decades because he's come alive spiritually with an eternal purpose. His life is now all about what Paul said in Philippians: "I want to know Christ."

What is your story? What are the rabbits you have relentlessly chased? Are they the right ones, the ones God wants you to pursue? Our Creator made us uniquely for a purpose. Just as greyhounds were born to run, so human beings are created for a reason. The old Catechism put it this way: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

## Knowing Christ

Human life functions best in a personal relationship with the Lord. When we “know Christ” and He lives in us, we find a meaning to everything we do. Out of love and gratitude for Him, we are led to serve and sacrifice for our families, to care genuinely for our friends and neighbors, to give of ourselves for our churches and communities, to learn about God more deeply and share our intimate feelings with Him in prayer.

And even when the inevitable hardships and sufferings come to us, as they do to all—when heart disease or leukemia, diabetes or arthritis, the birth of a handicapped grandchild or the death of a spouse brings sorrow upon us—we are not overwhelmed, because the Lord is within us to sustain us. ■



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