



WHEN GOD FORGETS:

The Good News, The Bad News

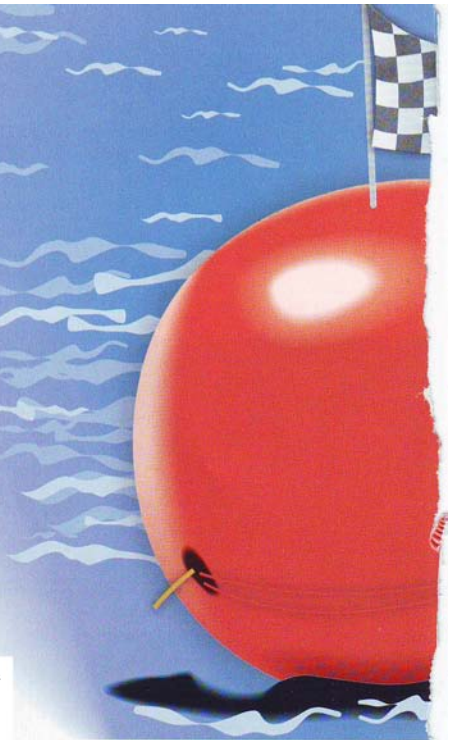
[BY DEBORAH M. GILL]

Several summers ago, on the middle of Lake Winnebago, in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, I made a profound spiritual discovery while my husband Jan and I were racing sailboats. It was the second race of the Inland Lake Yachting Association Championship Regatta.

Winnebago is a river that was dammed to form a lake. This lake is 40 miles long, 12 miles across, and shallow. A lake that is big, but shallow, can develop huge waves.

Other classes of boats had been racing that morning. Among the big boats — the A-fleet — 17 boats went out and four of them capsized. Two of these boats broke their carbon-fiber masts. Smaller boats — C-boats — had also gone out. Of the 40 boats in the C-fleet, only 22 came back. The rest capsized or turtled (went completely upside down) and had to be towed in. Our boat is smaller yet.

My husband and I sail an M16, so named because it is 16-feet long. It has two sails. The larger sail is called the main. The smaller sail is called the jib. Instead of one centerboard,



we have two bilge boards (one on each side) that keep our boat from slipping. I run the boards along with the jib. The wind had been so strong that morning the ILYA committee had canceled the first M16 race. But

windward; then boaters run *with* the wind — leeward; and continue that course two and one-half times (sailing five half-laps), ending *into* the wind. Unfortunately, when the gun went off at the starting line we were not in

— one half-lap ahead — that the rest of the boats were going the opposite direction from ours; they were heading windward while we were heading leeward.

As our boat approached the others, the sailors called out, "Good racing, Jan, good racing."

At the fourth mark — with only one mark left — Jan cautioned me, "It's not over, yet."

When we rounded the fourth mark, the wind changed, and something went terribly wrong. We started that last half-lap way ahead. I thought we had stayed ahead of the fleet. But it is hard to be sure. In a long racecourse it is hard to see the mark because it is 1.4 miles away. Though it is a big, bright orange buoy, boaters need to strain to spot it on the horizon. Because it is impossible to sail directly into the wind, sailboats must tack — zigzagging this way, then that way — with each skipper choosing the angles he thinks will be best. A boater cannot be *sure* he is ahead of the others until he gets close to the mark.

When all the boats started tacking toward the final mark, Jan retorted, "We'll be lucky to come in fifth."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "We've been ahead *all four laps*."

He pointed with his nose, "Look at those boats over there. They've got good air."

Incredulously, I questioned, "Are you sure they are ahead of us?"

He said, "Yes, they are ahead of us."

Do you know what? The skipper was right. As the boats converged on the final mark at the finish line, they beat us. Even though we had been leading the race four out of five marks, we finished in fifth place.

Jan and I still remember the first four marks of that race. But no one else in the ILYA cares about those first four marks. What was written in the

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when it was time for the second race, we went out. There were 20 boats in our fleet.

The racecourse for an M16 regatta is 7 miles. The course set that day was a windward-leeward 2 1/2.

Boaters start by heading *into* the wind —

a great position. The start is *important* in sailboat racing. Whoever gets out front first gets the best air and has the best chance of winning the race.

Though we did not get a good start, by careful, strategic sailing — and a little bit of luck — by the time we made it to the first mark our boat was in first place. When we rounded the second mark, we were No. 1.

When we rounded the third mark, we were still No. 1.

In fact, by this time we were so far ahead

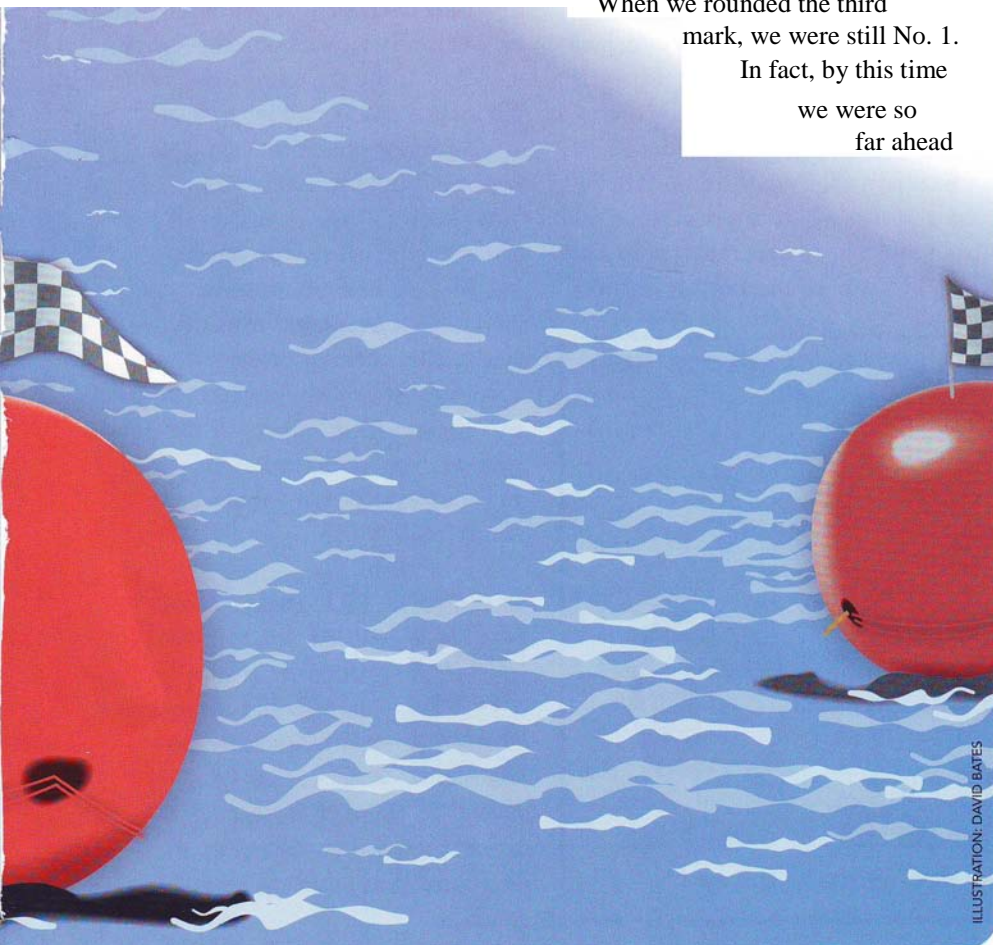


ILLUSTRATION: DAVID BATES

archives for Jan and me? “Fifth Place.” That is all that counts in the end.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN SAILBOAT RACING — AND IN LIFE — IS HOW YOU FINISH

It is great to get a good start. It is important to do well in the middle. But nothing is as important as how you finish. Many are the marks we round throughout our laps in life. What is the first mark, second mark, or third in a pastor’s life? Maybe it was his first decade in ministry, or the second decade; the first community he lived in, or maybe the second; the first church he served, or possibly the third. Maybe he did well progressing through these marks. But in the end, when the record is written, none of that matters as much as how he finished the race.

Sailing competitors forget many good things after a race is over. The Bible says that God does, as well. He forgets the many laps in life, and focuses on how we finish. In Ezekiel 33:1–20, Ezekiel shares the sobering truth about when God forgets — the good news and the bad news.

We are all familiar with God’s grace to forgive those who repent. God

not only forgives, but also forgets sin. That is the good news. Verses 14–16 emphasize this point. “And if I say to the wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right — if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die. *None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him.* He has done what is just and right; he will surely live” (emphasis added).

It is hard to believe verses 12 and 13 are in the Book. “Therefore, son of man, say to your countrymen, ‘The righteousness of the righteous man will not save him when he disobeys. . . . The righteous man, if he sins, will not be allowed to live because of his former righteousness.’ If I tell the righteous man that he will surely live, but then he trusts in his righteousness and does evil, *none of the righteous things he has done will be remembered*; he will die for the evil he has done” (emphasis added).

Ezekiel’s audience could not believe this aspect of God’s forgetfulness — the bad news. The people rebutted in verse 17: “The way of the Lord is not just.”

Can you hear them?
 “That’s not fair, God. You’ve got to remember all our years of fastidious faithfulness. We’ve put in our time; we’ve paid our dues. Shouldn’t our impeccable past permit a little coasting and compromise in the present? What about the first, second, third, and fourth laps? Shouldn’t they count for something? Add it all up, God — our righteous record should tip the scales for eternity.

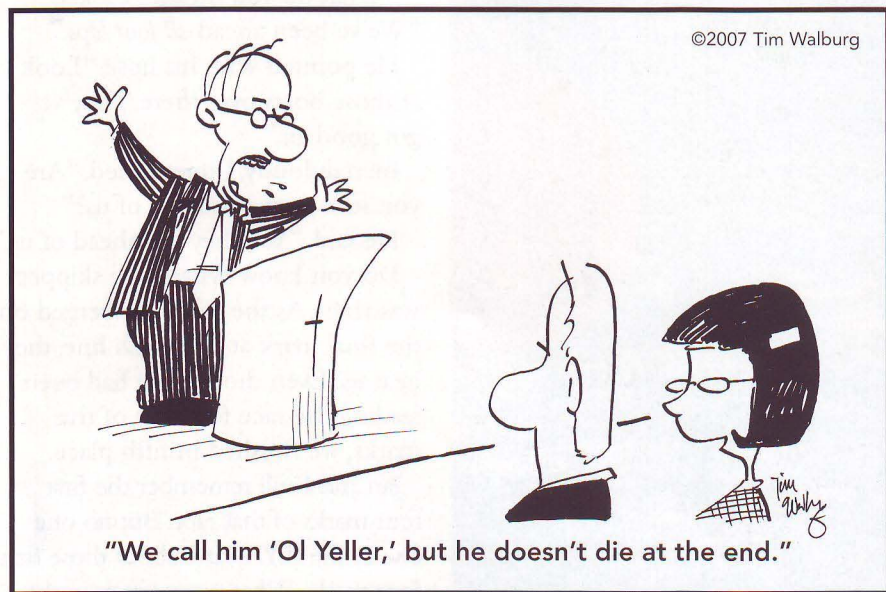
A righteous past has no value unless you keep on keeping on in righteousness.

You can’t just forget all that, God — it’s not fair.”

But God overrules their objection in verses 18, 19. As Almighty Judge, God has decreed that if the wicked *turn* from their wickedness — they will live. If the righteous turn from their righteousness, they will die.

Sin cannot condemn you if you reject it. Righteousness will not help you if you relax it. A righteous past has no value unless you keep on keeping on in righteousness.

Life has seasons and ministry has stages. But nothing matters more than how we finish. Just like sailors in a regatta, God forgets all the good that we have done unless we *persist* in doing good until we cross the finish line. 🏁



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