



Press On

Philippians 3:12-21

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is famous for its spirit of joy. And yet, as he wrote to this faithful congregation, a shadow loomed over both Paul and his friends. The church's beloved apostle was imprisoned facing a possible sentence of death. As a good pastor, Paul labors for their peace as he writes, reminding them of the faithfulness of God. He also calls them to persevere as

they may well share in his trials as persecution against the church increases.

Scripture describes salvation not as a singular, once and for all moment. Rather, salvation consists of the Spirit's sovereign work of regeneration (the new birth), sanctification, and final glorification. The initial work of regeneration may be seen as a coin. On the one side is the Spirit's sovereign work. On the other side is our response of repentance and faith through which we are justified before God. Glorification is the eternal state of peace and joy in the blessed presence of God in glorified bodies, inhabiting a new creation.

In Philippians three Paul's emphasis is on that middle stage of salvation in which day-by-day God progressively sanctifies us or conforms us into the image of Christ. And while we remain passive in the Spirit's work of regeneration, sanctification involves grace-energized effort. This is not to say that we are justified by grace but sanctified by works. However, we are justified by grace through a living faith. The Apostle Paul, the great champion of God's free grace tells us here that in this life we will need to "press on" toward that prize to which God has called us upward in Christ Jesus.

Though Paul presses on toward this prize and calls us to join him in that same pursuit, he is not suggesting that we may gain Christ by virtue of our own merit. Christ has already made us his own (vs. 12). And so the striving that Paul describes here is a *sanctified* effort. It is a straining forward that is carried along by the knowledge that Christ has graciously saved us. Those whom Christ calls, he keeps. "My sheep hear my voice...I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28).

1. Pressing On Requires Grit

Vs. 12 – "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." – Paul used athletic metaphors and imagery to depict the faithful Christian life. It requires the sort of quality that many have called "grit." Grit refers to courage, resolve, and strength of character. It's precisely what is required if we are to "press on" toward Christ in this world. What Paul has *not* obtained is what he has referred to in verses 10 and 11, namely, to know Christ and the full completion of conformity to Him.¹ The second clause confirms this. What Paul does possess is not yet perfected so he presses on toward the goal which will only finally be realized in the life to come. But Paul is also careful to say that his striving after what he does not yet have is the result of Christ having laid hold of him. Always, it is the Lord and his grace *first* and our response after.

The verb translated "press on" (*dioko*) is the same one Paul uses in 3:6 to describe his efforts in persecuting the church prior to his conversion. He is saying that the energy he once devoted to being an enemy of Christ he now invests in knowing and pressing on toward beholding Christ.

Vs. 13 – "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead..." – Paul reminds us that he has not achieved perfection. His sanctification, like our own, is an ongoing process and will be till that day that we see Christ. But until then he labors to throw off from himself what is behind. Paul had to "forget" what he had once been. He could not allow the accuser to sideline him with the weight of his past sin. Such a weight would have hindered his pursuit of Christ. A successful runner never looks back. He fixes his eyes upon the prize before

¹Moises Silva, *Philippians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) p. 174

him. Such a focus requires grit. It requires discipline. Far more than talent, it means courageous effort and endurance in pursuit of a worthy goal.

2. Pressing On Requires a Goal

Vs. 14 – “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” – Paul states the main point of the sentence he began in the middle of verse 13. Here is now the “one thing” he does: “I press on toward the goal.” Pressing on toward Christ in a life which constantly seeks to distract us with lesser pleasures requires that we keep the goal before us. We must remain fixed on the prize which is Christ. “Because his ultimate goal is the state of perfection at the resurrection he continually presses on toward it.”²

The prize that Paul has in mind is far greater than anything an athlete competes for. His prize is not money or medals but “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” That is, his eyes are fixed upon that day when he will know Christ in all his fullness and will attain that place of peace and completeness that will come at the resurrection when the corruptible puts on incorruptibility (1 Corinthians 15:50ff). It is an “upward call” because it is directed heavenward, that is toward the new creation not the sinful world we now inhabit. Paul makes a similar contrast between this world and the world to come in Colossians 3:1-4:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

“The most intense pleasure of Heaven is found in John’s vision of the coming New Jerusalem, in which God’s ‘servants will worship him. They will see his face’ (Rev 22:3-4). As a result, as John writes elsewhere, ‘we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2). This is the prize that Paul sees as he stretches his stride toward the goal: that he, his Philippian friends, and all others who trust in Jesus will know Christ as they have been known by Christ (1 Cor 13:12).”³

3. Pressing On Requires Examples

Vs. 17 – “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” – This is not hubris or bravado on Paul’s part. This is Christian discipleship. Those more mature in Christ should be able to say to newer Christians, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” We need such examples.

Paul also reminds us of those who have fallen away and made themselves “enemies of the cross of Christ” (vs. 18). To the Colossians he mentions a man named Demas positively along with Luke as those who send them greetings. But by the time he writes his second epistle to Timothy it is clear that there has been a tragic turn: “For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica...” (4:10). Following the best examples also involves avoiding the bad examples (and knowing the difference between the two!).

4. Pressing on Requires a Savior

Vs. 20 – “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...” – By “citizenship” Paul means to capture the full status and privileges that belong to the people of God. And notice how citizenship is corporate (“our citizenship”). And though Paul had already “met” Jesus and walked with Jesus, he still acknowledged that, along with the rest of God’s people, he waited to see the face of his Savior. This was the compelling vision of Paul’s life and for all those who “await a Savior.”

If anyone had an excuse to “deconstruct” it was Paul. He had suffered the loss of all things by following Jesus. His body had been ruined by the physical tortures he suffered. He languished in dungeons, been shipwrecked, fled from bandits, and mistreated by those he served. And yet he pressed on toward the prize of knowing, being conformed to, and ultimately seeing Jesus.

²Matthew Harmon, *Philippians*, (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015) p. 352

³Dennis Johnson, *Philippians*, REC (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013) p. 217