

PRESSING ON  
Philippians 3:12-14 (NASB)  
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Out of a life of great zeal for the Lord, but also great sufferings, sorrows, and punishments, the Apostle Paul wrote these stirring words: **“Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection of the dead] or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 3:12-14 NASB).

When I look at my own walk with the Lord, I often think: *Not there yet! A lot of growing left to do!* And I embrace Paul’s encouragement to press on, upward toward Jesus, and never quit.

As I work through various physical ailments, and those of my family and friends, I feel like invisible fingers are pulling back on me. I feel the need to press on.

When I watch the world falling into the complicated darkness of spiritual disintegration, moral waywardness, and intellectual deceit, I think of our ministry to that world and our need to press on. How desperately people need for us to do this!

You can add your own personal experience of feeling dragged down in innumerable ways. There are times when we think that neither we nor those we know will be able to get back up again.

At those times we choose to believe that God will help us as we press on in faith.

Yes! But how? Something so important deserves to be unpacked to make sure that we understand what it means. I suggest to you three things which enable us to press on. We need to press away the self, press into our identity in Christ, and press through all hindrances.

## PRESS AWAY THE SELF

Earlier in the same chapter in Philippians Paul explained that he needed to press away, or relinquish, personal things which got in the way of pressing on. He wrote: **“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith...”** (Philippians 3:7-9).

At the core of this statement is Paul’s need, as a Hebrew of Hebrews, to press away any idea that he could justify himself before God by keeping the law. This was a powerful confusion in first century

Judaism, and never part of Biblical Jewish faith. But every time we try to be a good person in that way we end up lying to ourselves. This is the law, for example, which says that adultery is wrong, and we may or may not have avoided that particular failure. But Jesus made it clear that the law demands that we not only avoid major failings, but that we achieve purity of heart such that we are not having inappropriate thoughts in the quiet of our minds.

No human being has ever done that our could ever do that. Our journey upward in Christ must be found by pressing away any thought of personal accomplishment before a holy God. Instead we embrace what Martin Luther called an “alien righteousness” by faith, a righteousness which belongs solely to Christ which is given as a gift to those who trust him. Everything starts there, and then we spend a lifetime learning to walk in that reality.

And in so many ways, the self is in the way of what God wants to do. God is in the business of glorifying himself by achieving his great redemptive purposes. Everything about us must become aligned with that. So we press the self away, not like the eastern religions which teach the denial and destruction of the self, but by consecration. We count our selves and our stuff as loss and give it all to God. And nothing we press away can begin to compare with what we gain in Christ Jesus, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”** (2 Cor. 9:15).

Here is a piercing practical way to measure our pressing away of the self. If we think we have faced this spiritual challenge, but we have not lost much of anything in the real world, we may not have faced it yet. Even the best things may be in the way of our upward call of God in Christ.

## PRESS INTO OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Passing through this personal relinquishment makes us fully available to embrace what God has for us. Next, we need to press into our identity in Christ so powerfully that being who we are in him and doing his will become our very food for life. Once, when the disciples asked Jesus if he wanted lunch, he told them that he had a food they did not know about--yet. As John recorded it: **“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work’”** (John 4:34). His identity as Messiah, his mission, and the messianic work fed him in the deepest part of his inner self.

To follow Jesus in that, we first need to press into our created identity. We are familiar with the urging from Proverbs 22:6: **“Train up a child in the way he should go, /Even when he is old he will not depart from it.”** This has two overlapping aspects. Every child needs to believe in God, love God, and seek to do his will. All parents need to work on those things with their children.

But beyond that, each child comes with a set of creational features—strengths which deserve to be developed through good parenting. Every kid is like a wrapped gift box. I remember being at the zoo with my grandson, Jacob. We were trying to navigate the paths and find the animals. Jacob took hold of the map, opened it carefully and began studying it intensely. He then pointed down the path and said: This way! He neither sounded nor looked like a four-year-old at that moment. A passion for maps and possibly leadership was revealed.

What strengths has God built into you by virtue of creation? It could literally be anything. Know that his intention for you personally can be seen in them. He wants you and me to run in our

strengths. I used to think that humans had abused draft horses for millennia by using them to pull blocks of stone, to yank out tree stumps, and to plow fields. Then Barb and I attended a pulling contest. Not only was it immediately clear that God has created these beautiful creatures to pull, they really want to do it! They can barely wait for the hitch to be attached before they take off. How has God built into you both the strength and the desire for something? When you engage those things you will feel like the famous Olympic runner, Eric Liddell, who said: “When I run, I feel His pleasure.” It will be food for your soul.

We also need to press into our redemptive identity. Paul wrote to the Romans: **“Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness”** (Romans 12:6-8). The very hand of God is at work in granting you and I specific spiritual gifts. If we want to press on with Christ, we need to press into those things.

This is first of all personal. Identifying your spiritual gifts is how you discover God’s intention for you. And being in the middle of God’s intention is where you will find your empowerment.

This is also about finding your place on God’s team. Are you a full ministry partner? Ask God this question: How does my created identity and spiritual gifting help propel the gospel team? And go find your team--the one with which you can actually connect and invest your resources. When you do, you will find that it is comprised of blemished humans who have decided that kingdom work and their identity in God supersede all human blemishes—including yours. You will find the greatest satisfaction of your soul on that team because God gives unspeakable affirmation to those who embrace his redemptive work.

So press into your created and redemptive identities! There you will find food for your deepest hunger.

## PRESS THROUGH ALL HINDRANCES

As you are discovering the wonders of pressing away the self and pressing into your identity in Christ, do not imagine that you will escape resistance. The world, the flesh, and the devil will throw every kind of junk at you—often from a direction you do not expect, and often in a way which makes you feel defenseless. The Apostle Paul faced that scenario often and in extreme ways. There was even a time when he felt like he could go no further.

But in the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul explained how he always dug himself out. His faith stayed latched on the truth that the sovereign God who called him by name in eternity past would unerringly carry him through every hindrance in this life to his glorification in heaven. Paul’s method, in short, was to stop in the middle of chaos and fix his faith on what God has already said: “I got this.” And then Paul pressed through the hindrances.

That reality has consequences which Paul drew out in the rest of chapter eight, including this list: **“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare**

**His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:31-37).**

Here is Paul's list:

All resistance we face is overcome by God's power.

All provision is made for whatever we lack.

All false charges against us are vacated.

All condemnations against us are nullified.

All barriers to the love of Christ are demolished.

In the face of these hindrances, we can, by walking with God, press through them all. We are more than conquerors! It is "more than" because a human conqueror might lose, but those who are in Christ are already seated with him in the heavenly places according to Ephesians 2:6. The victory has already happened. Christ has won and bound us together in union with him.

So, press through every hindrance, brothers and sisters! Our mission demands it, Christ is worth it, and his power will see us through every time.

The first book of *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien is entitled *The Fellowship of the Ring*. As you may know, the One Ring is the focus of evil power in the fictional world of Middle Earth. If the evil Sauron, who made it, can get his hands on it, he will destroy or enslave all of the world's inhabitants. The fellowship of the ring is the group, including Frodo Baggins, which is on a mission to destroy the Ring in the fires beneath Mount Doom where Sauron originally forged it. There is no other way to get rid of it.

As the group journeys toward the evil mountain they find themselves attacked repeatedly by Sauron's servants and allies. Eventually the group decides that their only way forward is through passages beneath a great mountain range. As they travel in the darkness, they inadvertently awaken a giant fire monster called a Balrog which begins chasing them. They run for their lives. The group crosses a narrow stone bridge over a seemingly bottomless chasm. The Balrog is close behind, roaring, flaming, and cracking a long whip.

One of their members, the wizard Gandalf, turns on the monster and shouts: "You shall not pass!" And by striking the stone bridge with his staff he collapses the part under the Balrog which begins to fall into the chasm. Gandalf is relieved by his success and turns away to continue the journey.

In an instant of time, the Balrog swings his long whip, snares Gandalf, and nearly pulls him over the edge. The group looks on with fear and disbelief as Gandalf hangs from the edge and begins losing his grip on the bridge.

Even in the moment of his greatest peril, Gandalf chooses to propel the mission by speaking with quiet authority: “Fly, you fools!” And then he slips over the edge. Gone. After a moment of abject sorrow, they all turn and run. \*

You see, Gandalf was the wisest and most powerful of the group. All hopes of successfully destroying the Ring were invested in him. He was the one who knew where to go and how to do it. And then he was snatched by the Balrog into the chasm of darkness.

The entire group was shocked stupid by his loss. How were they, with their little powers, supposed to withstand the attacks of Sauron with his many evil agents crisscrossing Middle Earth in search of the Ring?

Gandalf’s last words were designed to return the focus of the fellowship of the Ring back to their essential mission. They were in possession of the one item upon which the future of Middle Earth hinged. They had to carry the ring to Mount Doom. There was no one else. So when Gandalf cried: “Fly, you fools!” he was saying: “You must press on! Your mission is the only hope of the world. You must not give up, no matter what Sauron throws at you.”

This is just a fantasy story. But here in the real world where we live, we who believe in Jesus are also members of a group with a mission to save the world. We hold in our possession the One Thing which is the key to this salvation: the good news of Jesus Christ. There is a real Sauron in our world who goes by many names: Accuser, Destroyer, Antichrist. He is, in fact, throwing every last thing against us to turn us from our mission. We also suffer the loss of many things on this journey.

And our wise and strong leader, Jesus Christ the Righteous, calls out to us with these words: “Press on! Do the mission! Carry the word of life to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Let the monsters come. I am with you.”

This is no time to slacken our walk with Christ, our pursuit of our identity in him, or our mission on his behalf. Let us press away the self, press into our identity in Christ, and press through every hindrance! The fate of uncountable souls depends on us to do this.

Our example, Paul the Apostle, did that very thing, as he wrote: “**...One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**”

\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJZZNHekEQw>

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