

Press On and Be Content
Philippians 3:10-16; 4:10-13
John Breon

Life is full of changes. We might even say that life is change. Psychologists chart the stages of life from infancy to adulthood. Babies become children who become teenagers who become young adults, then middle adults, then older adults. We experience change all through this process. We grow, we make transitions from one stage to another, one place to another, one relationship to another. We even mark the various passages of life with rituals: birth, baptisms, graduations, weddings, promotions, retirements, funerals.

Not only do we see change in our lives, we see the world around us changing. People born in the earlier part of the last century have seen unimaginable changes during their lifetimes. And there's no indication that changes in technology and society will slow down any time soon.

Maybe we come to church hoping to escape all this change. Some years ago I heard a church leader describing changes in society and in the church. He told about his mother, who was in her eighties at the time. She was a lifelong member of her church and resisted new things in worship and church life. She described all the changes in the world she had seen in her lifetime, then she said, "My church is the only place where nothing ever changes." That's a comfort to some people. And we do find stability and consistency in the church. But the church also preaches "repent"—which means change! The church calls us to leave behind the old life, to find new life, to grow in faith, to keep changing. And we experience all kinds of changes in the life of the church—like an associate pastor leaving and a new one coming on board; like leaving an old location and moving to a new one. You've heard that the only one who really likes change is a baby with a wet diaper. But change happens whether we like it or not.

Every change involves letting go of something: the past, our feelings, comfort, relationships, places. It can feel like a loss and that brings grief. So when change happens we may grieve and go through all that the process of grief includes like denial, anger, fear, disorientation and such. If we're

carrying unresolved grief from something else, that old stuff may come out during the present loss. And, any change, even good change, brings stress. So we need the process of transition to get from an ending, losing, letting go to a new beginning. Transition is the in-between time when we adjust to the change (William Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, page 5).

Since life is marked by change, how do we navigate it successfully? How do we handle times of change? How do we make transitions so they move us closer to God's purpose for us?

In Paul's letter to the church in Philippi I've found a principle, an orientation that can guide us and help us as we move through times of transition.

Paul wrote this letter during a time of turmoil in his own life. Arrest and imprisonment interrupted his missionary work—his preaching the gospel in new places and starting new churches. As he wrote to his friends in Philippi, encouraging them and thanking them for supporting him, Paul didn't know what the outcome of his imprisonment would be. Would he be released or would he die?

As he refutes some false teachings, Paul compares his heritage as a Jew—his credentials—with the heritage and credentials of the false teachers. Then he says that all that was to his profit he now considers loss for Christ's sake. He goes further and says that he considers "everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Paul had experienced a dramatic change from a life of zealous Hebrew legalism to life in Christ. Where he used to persecute followers of Jesus, he now followed Jesus himself.

Now, Paul says, I consider all my past, all my credentials, all my accomplishments, to be garbage. I will leave all that so I may gain Christ and be found in Christ. I have no righteousness of my own coming from my efforts to obey God's law. The righteousness I have comes from God through faith in Christ.

Then Paul states his great desire—the goal that oriented his life and motivated him: "I want to know Christ." Paul wanted Jesus more than anything. His relationship with Christ was more important than all else.

A little boy was telling his mom about his Sunday School teacher: "She must be Jesus' grandmother, because he was all she talked about."

Here is something we can lay hold of to help us through transitions: Have a goal, a purpose that is greater than all of life's changes and that remains constant through changes. And Paul's goal is the only one that can really sustain us—to know Christ. Not just facts about Jesus, but real relationship—knowing him like you know a friend or a brother. This relationship sustains us and keeps us stable in the midst of change.

We know Christ now and we desire to know him more fully. This relationship is not just meeting Jesus, but getting to know him, growing in our knowledge of him. In relation to God we are always growing, always changing. God guides us to new places, in new adventures. God keeps us growing and moving in the process of becoming more and more like Jesus.

The desire to know Christ in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings motivates us and keeps us going. Paul says, "I haven't obtained all this. I'm not perfect. But Christ Jesus has taken hold of me and I press on to take hold of his goal for me."

Paul realized that he had not yet reached Christ's goal for him—he still had a way to go. When I start thinking I'm pretty advanced spiritually, that I'm awfully mature, God reminds me of how little I really know, how far I really have to go. I realize again the truth of the old saying that the closer you get to God, the further you realize you have to go. That's humbling, but it's also promising to realize what lies ahead of us. The future is bright. The best really is yet to be.

My parents took part in a church renewal event called the Lay Witness Mission several times over the years. One small group exercise in that event is to do a spiritual autobiography timeline. You draw a line showing how close you are to God, how much you've grown, at different points in your life. Dad says he keeps his spiritual growth line pretty close to the bottom of the chart because there is so much more yet to experience, so much more of God to know.

So we say with Paul, I haven't arrived yet. But I do this one thing: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, "I press on

toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

The word Paul uses for “press on” is the same word he used in verse 6 for “persecuting.” There it means “to pursue like a hunter.” Where Paul once hunted Christians to kill them, he now pursues with intensity the goal of knowing Jesus Christ. Paul’s words here also give the image of running. As in a race, Paul says, I run with concentration, intent on reaching the goal and claiming the prize God has for me. The prize is eternal relationship with God that overcomes even death.

Knowing God in Christ is the great purpose of our lives. Having that settled and setting our desire on that prize carries us through all our transitions.

Running this race, pursuing the knowledge of the Lord, is not easy. I heard once about a tax-collector’s sign at the foot of Mt. Everest. It listed several hundred dollars in fees to climb the highest mountain in the world. At the bottom the sign said, “Discounts available for lesser summits.”

God’s highest costs all we are and have—“My utmost for God’s highest!” We are pressing on toward God’s highest purpose for us. We leave everything behind to have this relationship and we give our all to win this race.

Another idea Paul suggests a little later seems contrary to this sense of always striving, always pressing on. As he thanks the Philippians for their support and the gifts they sent him, Paul says, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”

Here’s another aspect of the principle for dealing with transition. Like pressing on, being content is part of knowing Jesus. The pressing on is the relationship’s growth. Contentment is how knowing Jesus sustains us in all of life’s circumstances.

The comedy film *Cool Runnings* is about the first Jamaican bobsled team to go to the Olympics. John Candy played a former American gold medalist who became the Jamaican team’s coach. The players grow to like the American coach and affectionately dub him “Sled-god.”

Later in the story, the coach’s dark history comes out. In the Olympics following his gold medal performance, he was caught breaking the rule by

putting weights in the U.S. sled, bringing disgrace on himself and his team. One of the Jamaican bobsledders could not understand why anyone who had already won a medal would cheat. Finally he nervously asked the coach to explain. "I had to win," said the coach. "I learned something. If you're not happy without a gold medal, you won't be happy with one."

Paul is saying that true contentment is not found in gold medals, or anything else. True contentment is found in Jesus Christ. We can be content because we rest in Christ, we are secure in our relationship with him. Living in that relationship we can be content in any circumstances because we can face all things with the strength Christ gives us (4:13). This "strength" recalls knowing Jesus in the *power* of his resurrection (3:10). Our sufficiency is in Christ—knowing him—Christ gives us strength—my God will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus (4:19).

Our circumstances, age, or place in life do not finally determine who we are. Our relationship with Christ shapes us and guides our response to life and its changes.

In that relationship we can be content with where we are. But we can also move when God calls us to a new place or when problems change our circumstances or location. Wherever we go, we go with God in this relationship.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of God's throne. It sat on a kind of chassis with wheels. God's glory was on wheels for every direction. The people were going into exile, but God was going with them. The God who established his covenant with them would stay with them.

Wherever we go, we go with God. God can always take us further toward his goal for us.

When asked how to please God, St. Anthony of the Desert replied, "Always have God before your eyes. Whatever you do, do it according to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. And wherever you stay, do not easily leave" (*Western Asceticism*, Icthus Ed., 37).

Keep your relationship with God up to date. Get your eyes on God and stay close to God every day. Get to know Jesus. Know the Scriptures thoroughly. Trust that God is able to lead and provide.

Bishop Hayes told one time about taking his young son fishing. His son was too small to cast, so Bishop Hayes cast for him then handed him the rod. He said his son stood on tiptoe, he was so excited. The little boy said, "Dad, I'm gonna catch Moby Dick! Free Willy is out there and I'm going to get him! Jaws 1, 2, 3, and 4 are out there and I'm going to catch them!" Standing on tiptoe shows anticipation and expectation. Even when the bishop's son didn't catch anything, he didn't get discouraged. He just said, "I'll get him next time!"

Can we face the future on tiptoe? Can we expect and anticipate new things God will do, great things God will provide?

We can face all changes and transitions knowing that God goes before us, with us, behind us. Our relationship with God sustains us going and coming, staying and leaving. Knowing Christ remains constant whatever transitions we have to make. God provides all that we need to navigate these transitions, so we face them with confidence.