

The Greatest Ambition

Philippians 3:1-4:3

John Breon

What drives you? What motivates you? The right motivation can help us accomplish amazing things. There's an old story about a man walking home one dark rainy night. He took a shortcut through the cemetery. Sure enough, he stepped into a freshly dug grave and slid to the bottom. He tried to climb out, but the ground was too wet and he couldn't get a grip. Finally, he gave up and sat in a corner to wait for help or daylight to come. After a while, another man stepped into the same open grave. He struggled with the slippery sides and tried to climb out like the first man had done. Then the man trying to climb out heard a voice from a dark corner of the grave say, "You can't get out of here that way." But he did! He was motivated.

As followers of Christ, we're not motivated by fear or by the desire to get ahead in life or to achieve status or success according to the world's standards. In Christ, we have different aims and goals. We can be ambitious, but we need the right ambition. In the heart of this chapter, Paul declares, "How changed are my ambitions! Now I long to know Christ and the power shown in his resurrection: now I long to share his suffering, even to die as he did, so that I may perhaps attain, as he did, the resurrection from the dead" (3:10 PHILLIPS). Paul shows us what the greatest ambition is.

Lloyd Ogilvie tells about the first time he read this verse in this translation when he was a young, ambitious pastor of a new congregation.

I had to honestly ask, "What is my primary ambition?" I was deeply unsettled to realize that all my ambitions, however laudable, were self-generated and self-oriented. I made a covenant with the Lord that day to go through the prolonged and painful surgery of soul that would be necessary to experience as well as say that my only ambition was Christ himself. (*Let God Love You* 106)

Let's get an overview of this chapter (actually 3:1-4:3) and then take it a section at a time. We'll see how Paul regarded knowing Jesus as the supreme value in life and we'll hear God's call to us to make that relationship our greatest ambition.

Paul calls the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord." Then he warns them about "Judaizers." Following that, he tells his own story where he offers himself as living evidence that observing the Law fails to produce righteousness. His story also includes an emphasis on participating in Christ's sufferings and being conformed to Christ's death while striving for the goal, the final fulfillment of life in Christ. Then he applies all this to the Philippians' situation. He urges them to imitate him in these matters. And he contrasts himself to others who are enemies of the cross and have lost their bearings. He emphasizes one of his themes: "already/not yet" existence in Christ. The Philippians are presently a colony of heaven even as they await Christ's return and their glorious transformation into Christ's likeness. In the last part of the section, Paul applies all of this to the need for the Philippian church to stand firm as one person for the gospel (see Gordon Fee, *Philippians* New International Commentary on the New Testament).

3:1-11 Changed Ambitions

Paul frames all that he says here with the call to rejoice in the Lord (3:1; 4:4). "In the Lord" is Paul's shorthand for Christian existence. All that we are and do is *in Christ*. He is the atmosphere, the environment where we live. "Rejoice" here doesn't mean having happy feelings. Rejoicing is an action, not a feeling. We express our joy in the Lord by speaking and singing it.

Now Paul repeats a warning that he had apparently given the Philippians when he was with them. Paul dealt with this problem throughout his ministry and in many of his letters to churches. He warns them to watch out for the "Judaizers." That word refers to a group of believers in Christ who went around trying to get Gentile, or non-Jewish, believers to become Jews in order to be Christians. Or, they wanted Gentile Christians to adopt Jewish identity markers like circumcision, Sabbath

observance, and eating only kosher food. These people believed that observing Jewish Law was a true demonstration of obedience to Christ and was evidence that the Gentile believers truly belonged to God's people.

Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire. But Christianity wasn't at this time and Christians were seen as following a Lord who was executed as a state criminal. Some of the Philippians may have thought that by embracing the outward expression of Jewish identity, they could still belong to Christ but ward off some of the opposition they were getting from their fellow Roman citizens.

But Paul very strongly warns them not to go that way. Not only would it steal their joy in the Lord, but it would add something else to grace. It would exchange relying on grace for boasting in one's flesh or taking pride in our own effort.

Paul says that the people who truly obey God are those who serve by the Spirit of God, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh. Then he goes on to show from his own experience how empty confidence in the flesh is. Here, "flesh" refers to the literal, physical body as well as to the pride of physical descent—that is, having the right ancestry, belonging to the right family or group.

If they want to play the game of confidence in the flesh, Paul can beat them at that. He lists his Jewish credentials. Everything he says would have been prized and valued by the Judaizers. Those things proved his status as part of the people of God, Israel. But then, like an accountant balancing the books, Paul takes this list of accomplishments that was on the credit side and puts it all on the debit or loss side. He found something else to put on the credit side of the ledger. That something is actually *someone*: Jesus the Messiah and Lord.

"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. In fact, everything is loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (3:8).

What achievements do we find security in? What credentials do we use to try to prove our status or worth? Are we ambitious to show that we belong to the right group? All of that will turn out to be empty, to be a dead end, when it comes to what really matters. Jesus Christ fulfills all that

Israel was meant to be. Jesus Christ is the one who was equal with God but emptied himself, humbled himself, and is now exalted as Lord of all. It's in him that we find true status, right standing, with God. Paul says, "I have no righteousness of my own coming from my efforts to obey God's law. The righteousness I have comes from God through Christ's faithfulness." We share in his faithfulness by our faith. We believe that the crucified and risen Jesus is Messiah and Lord of the world and we are loyal to him. Nothing compares to Jesus.

This is why Paul says that his great ambition is to know Christ. Not know *about* Jesus. But *know* him, like you know a friend or brother. Have a relationship with him. This knowing Christ involves knowing some other things. It includes knowing the power of his resurrection. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is present and available to help us. The resurrection of Jesus was a first act of the future God has planned for all his people. Already, in the present, we experience something of the power of the resurrection. We are alive in Christ. His resurrection power enables us to live in him, to follow him, to be his people, to be the body of Christ.

That resurrection power also enables us to share, to participate, in the sufferings of Jesus and to become like him in his death. His cross continues to shape our lives. The mindset of Christ who emptied and humbled himself, who served and sacrificed himself, is our example. We can't follow his example in our own strength. We need the power of his resurrection present in the Holy Spirit to help us live that way.

That's our present existence in Christ. That's the "already" of life in him. But there's more. Paul talks about also somehow being resurrected from the dead. Now he's talking about the "not yet" aspect of life in Christ. Someday, when Jesus returns, he will raise up his people to be like him in glory. Paul returns to this theme in verses 20-21, where he says that our citizenship is in heaven—now. That's the already. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform the body of our humiliation to conform to the body of his glory—in the future. That's the not yet.

3:12-16 Press On

Here Paul returns to the present. He says he hasn't yet obtained resurrection or the full knowing of Christ we will have when he returns. The goal is still ahead of us. But, Paul says, I press on. I forget what is behind and I strain toward what is ahead. We're running the race of life in Christ. We're pushing ahead, we're pressing on toward the goal of knowing Christ fully and living fully the resurrection life when Jesus comes to transform us and all creation.

Even running this race is not something we do on our own. Jesus has taken hold of us and all that we do is loving response to him. The power of his resurrection empowers us to run, to press on, to grow.

A mature Christian attitude recognizes that we have not yet fully arrived. We're in the process of growing up in Christ, of growing closer to him, of increasingly fulfilling his purpose for us. He will continue carrying on the good work he's begun in us until that final day.

Life in Christ, maturing in Christ, is not instant. It's a long process. James Bryan Smith compares growing as disciples to making pickles. You can't just dip a cucumber in the brine and vinegar solution and quickly pull it out or all you have is a baptized cucumber. To become a pickle, it needs to soak in the brine for a long time. The solution works its way into the cucumber, changing it into a pickle.

Smith cites a book that Walter Britt also told me about recently. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell shares discoveries about exceptional people.

The emerging picture from studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert in anything. ...In study after study of composers, basketball players, chess players, master criminals and what have you, this number comes up again and again. ...It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know and achieve true mastery.

This is not meant to discourage us, but to put the process of knowing Christ in perspective. We want to know Christ more fully and be changed in

the process, but when change is slow in coming, we may be tempted to quit. But whatever we do to change, whatever steps we take in this race, however small, have an effect. The Holy Spirit is at work to renovate our soul when we earnestly engage in spiritual training exercises. But we mustn't expect massive changes overnight (*The Good and Beautiful God* 185-87). The race we're running in Christ is not a sprint, but a marathon.

3:17-4:3 A Colony of Heaven Standing in the Lord

Paul asks his friends in Philippi to follow his example of pressing on to know Christ fully. He reminds them of other examples of life in Christ. Just minutes ago, as this letter was being read in their gathering, they heard about Timothy and Epaphroditus who were examples of following Christ's servant attitude. They are likely among the examples Paul mentions now.

He reminds the church that some people are enemies of the cross of Christ. He's probably describing some traveling teachers who had a view of faith that allowed them a great deal of undisciplined self-indulgence. That way leads to death. But conforming to Christ's death and sharing in his sufferings leads to life as a colony of heaven now and a future transformation to be like Christ in glory.

Now Paul applies all of this to a specific situation in the Philippian congregation. "In this way stand firm in the Lord, beloved. Euodia I entreat and Syntyche I entreat to have the same mindset in the Lord." Earlier he told them to stand firm for the gospel and to have the same mindset, that is, the mindset of Christ. Now he specifically calls on these two women to do this. These women are leaders in the church and they probably have some disagreement about how to "do the gospel," how to stand firm in their particular situation. This disagreement has likely not caused a division in the church. Paul addresses them by name, which he doesn't usually do with people who have been truly divisive. He's trying to head off a greater problem by speaking the truth to them in love. And he calls on another partner of his and others in the church to help these women. What a great picture of Christian community.

To wrap up all this, here's Gordon Fee's summary from his commentary on Philippians:

To “stand firm in the Lord” is not just a word for the individual believer, as such words are so often taken, but for any local body of believers. The gospel is ever and always at stake in our world, and the call to God’s people, whose “names are written in the book of life,” is to live that life now in whatever “Philippi” and in the face of whatever opposition is found. But to do so effectively, its people, especially those in leadership, must learn to subordinate personal agendas to the larger agenda of the gospel, “to have the same mindset in the Lord.” This means humbling, sacrificial giving of oneself for the sake of others; but then this is what the gospel is about in any case. So in effect these exhortations merely call us to genuine Christian life in the face of every form of pagan and religious opposition.

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.”

Let’s not settle for a lesser summit. Let’s make it our ambition to know Christ now, to know him better each day, to know him fully in glory. We commit ourselves to pursuing that goal, we give our “utmost for his highest.” And God gives power and strength to press on, to run the race, to go to the heights God intends for us.