

The Joy of Pressing on in the Gospel – Philippians 3:12-16

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The Chapel at Pasadena
December 5, 2021

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please contact Pastor Derek at Derek@chapelpasadena.com.]

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Philippians 3:12-16...

Please stand for the reading of God's word:

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. 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Who in here has ever heard of the “miracle mile?” On August 7, 1954, during the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada, what many considered the greatest mile-run matchup ever took place. Britisher Roger Bannister and Australian John Landy were the only two sub-four-minute milers in the world. And both runners were in peak condition. For track fans, this was their prime Mayweather and Pacquiao matchup that boxing fans never received. Although there were several runners on the track, all eyes were glued on these two men. Before the race, Bannister strategized that he would relax during the third lap and save everything for his finishing drive. This quickly changed during the third lap, as John Landy poured it on and stretched his already substantial lead. Bannister reacted by picking up the pace himself. The lead was cut and half, and by the time they were on their final lap, these two runners were even. Both men were flying, absolutely pouring out all that they had. Bannister was certain he would lose if Landy didn't lose any steam. And then it happened. During the last stride before the homestretch, Landy looked back, which became a fatal lapse of concentration.

When you look back while running it breaks up your momentum and deteriorates your form. You're sacrificing efficiency in running whenever you turn your head to look back, even if it's ever so slightly. This led to Bannister taking full advantage and winning the Empire Games that day by five yards. Instead of keeping his eyes focused on the future victory, he looked back over his shoulder, which resulted in the loss of the race. If only he would have forgot what was behind him, and focused all his energy on pressing forward, this story would have a very different ending.

If the sports-knowledgeable Apostle Paul would have had the opportunity to cheer in the stands during these games, he would have seen Landy's mistake in a flash. He fully understood to be a successful runner, one must not look back over his shoulder.

But he also understood, to be a successful citizen of heaven, worthy of the gospel, the believer must press forward and avoid looking back at all costs. This is the point of our text this morning. Paul employs the metaphor of a runner when seeking to get this very point across. This is why I tagged this message as *The Joy of Pressing on in the Gospel*. How do we as a people who have lives filled with great success and failure avoid the trap of focusing on the past, but rather press forward into the Lord Jesus. Paul answers this question for us this morning. Here are our three points:

- I. Paul's Profession (12-13)**
- II. Paul's Pressing (13-14)**
- III. Paul's Plea (15-16)**

But before we jump into our points, we need to briefly review verses 10-11, as Paul makes a reference to these passages in his first statement. *Not that I have already obtained this...* What is the this that Paul is referring to? The resurrection from the dead. We find this in verse 11. Let's reread these verses.

¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. - Philippians 3:10-11

So, Paul makes this declaration that every day was a relentless pursuit of an ever-deepening personal knowledge of Christ. The apostle actually longed to suffer with Christ, as he understood that suffering for Christ is the sacred path to deeper knowledge of him. That by any means possible, "I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Therefore, this is what Paul is referring to by the "this" in verse 12.

- I. Paul's Profession (12-13)**

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect. So, here's what we'll do. We'll lay the theological foundation first, and then zoom our lens in on the practical application of this text. Let's dig a little deeper to discover what Paul hasn't yet obtained. You should be no stranger to the concept of "inaugurated eschatology," even if you aren't familiar with the phrase. This is a reoccurring concept within the Pauline corpus. And remember, eschatology is simply a study of the end times. The New Testament authors would teach that the promised kingdom of the Old Testament was inaugurated during the first advent of the Lord Jesus. Although many Old Testament passages don't possess this well-defined idea of two advents of the coming Messiah. Hence, many of Jesus' contemporaries were ready to crown him as king during his first visitation. And he was indeed king, just not the king they expected.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. - Isaiah 9:6-7

But God in his wisdom planned for the coming of the Messiah to not just be one event, but rather two. He inaugurated at his first coming, giving us a foretaste of the coming consummation of the kingdom which would occur at his second coming. So, we live in the in between, in the already but not yet. This is why Paul can say in verse 16, “let us hold true to what we have attained.” While at the same time in verse 12 say that he hasn’t yet obtained. *Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert* when discussing this issue would say,

Thus we enjoy the forgiveness of sin even as we struggle with it; thus, we enjoy the presence of the Spirit even as we may still grieve him; thus, we have been raised with Christ, seated at his right hand in the heavenly places, even as know we will, for a time, return to dust.

So, Paul is saying, there are realities that will be realized only at the eschatological consummation. I experience these realities currently, but only in part. He has not yet come to know Christ in the way that only the eschaton will bring, and therefore he has not yet been perfected. He says elsewhere,

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. -1 Corinthians 15:53

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. -1 Corinthians 13:12

So, what are the practical implications of these theological truths. God, forbid we stop with lofty theology, and fail to press into what that means for our everyday lives. Paul makes clear that he has not yet arrived. Doesn’t it appear as if Paul is seeking to make it abundantly clear that he is not yet perfect? He states it in verse 12, and then reiterates it once more in verse 13. Let’s reread.

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. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.

It would have been easy for the Philippian Church, or any saint for that matter, to place Paul on a pedestal. To use a measuring rod of perfection on the life of Paul. Beloved we too would be tempted to view Paul in this light. The great missionary, Paul. The one who had an encounter with the resurrected Lord. The one appointed by the Lord Jesus as a unique missionary to the gentiles. The one who gave up his right of receiving a salary from the churches he served, but rather took up tent making so he would not be a burden on anyone. Paul, who jettisoned the idea of marriage in his own life, because he wanted to devote every waking moment to proclaiming the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Paul, who went on four missionary journeys and planted dozens of churches. Paul, who disciplined men who would in turn serve as delegates and pastors in some of the most prominent churches of their day. Paul, the one who was taken up to the third heavens, rather vision or in body, I have no clue. Paul, the apostle who worked harder than the rest of them, although he had a late start. Paul, who raised the dead and healed the sick. Paul, the one who had a robust understanding of the gospel and an impeccable hermeneutic on how we should interpret the Old Testament in light of Christ’s death and resurrection. Paul, who authored 75% of the New Testament. Paul who rejoiced in the face of severe suffering for the gospel.

This Paul says, 'I know God ain't done with me yet. Just in case you've read this epistle thus far and have been led to believe otherwise, I know I am not yet perfect.' Now don't get it twisted, this isn't the subjective profession of an oversensitive soul who is blinded to his own progress. No, he makes clear in his writings that he is aware of the Spirit's sanctifying work in his life.

But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. -1 Corinthians 9:27

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. -1 Corinthians 9:19

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. -1 Corinthians 15:10

So, Paul understood that God was working in him. While at the same time, he wasn't afraid to be vulnerable to ensure the members of these churches weren't under the illusion that he was somehow perfect. He shares his struggle with sin in the well-known passage of Romans 7.

¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! -Romans 7:15-25

Paul was in the same war against sin that the Philippians found themselves in. As your pastor, I too want you to know that I have not arrived. Therefore, I ask for grace on your part. I have and will fail you in various areas. Like Paul, this doesn't mean that I sit around in defeat, or that I believe myself to be disqualified to serve as an elder. But it does mean, I live with me 24/7, therefore I know that I haven't arrived. Too often I can hold on to anger and bitterness longer than I should. Just ask my wife. I have to intentionally stay out of gyms during peak hours, because my eyes begin to wander, and then my mind becomes filled with lustful thoughts. There are certain restrictions on my laptop and mobile devices that remove the temptation to fall into certain areas of sin. Beloved, your pastor has not arrived, and is not already perfect. This is why the gospel must be real. The Lord Jesus taking the penalty for my sins, not just past but present and future, must be a reality in order for me to be experiencing any type of joy in this life and the next. So be careful not to place myself, nor any other leaders in this congregation to a standard of perfection.

Don't have any heroes, but the Lord Jesus. No matter how many books they've written, no matter how many conferences they've spoken at, no matter how big their following is, your heroes will fail you if you place them in a position that they're not meant to be placed in. All of this to say, I need grace when I disappoint you. Both from the Lord Jesus and from his people.

But not only do Christian leaders need to be vulnerable, and hence need grace, but you as a believer are in need as well. Look at what Paul says in verse 15.

Let those of us who are mature think this way...

Seemingly referring to all of verses 12-14. In the last few years, the idea of a "safe space" on university campuses, among other arenas, has been both practiced and debated. The idea is to have a space on campus where a person is safe from being silenced or bullied by those who have more power. So, it's meant to protect others from ridicule or pain. In these safe spaces, there's no shaming because students are protected from anything that would disrupt their good feelings.

The local church ought to be the safest space for Christians to confess imperfection and sin. We see this beautifully displayed among the churches in the Epistles. Many of you here with me today are more than just brothers and sisters in Christ, you are church members of this body of fellowship (and I also am a fellow church member alongside you), and we have a duty to one another. And yet, we don't naturally confess our sins to each other, do we? Prior to God saving us, we're used to a world where everybody pretends to have everything together. Particularly in the digital age in which we find ourselves. As a result, our churches don't feel like a safe space for confession. But we must cultivate a culture in which we find ourselves comfortable sharing our struggles and failures with one another. This means cultivating a culture of grace. This doesn't mean that we share every single detail of every single struggle with every single believer we come across. But it does mean that we are naturally inclined to let others in, as well as having a natural posture of grace for those who fail.

Paul makes clear that he hasn't arrived, and yet this doesn't lead to spiritual apathy. This leads us to our second point this morning.

II. Paul's Pressing

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.

This future eschatological fulfillment belongs only to those who persevere. This is the second time in this epistle where Paul places human responsibility and God's sovereignty right next to one another. The first was in 2:12-13. If Paul did not continue to press until his dying day, he would never experience the consummated kingdom, and in turn would never know Christ face to face. You may have heard it said, it's not so much about how you start the race, but rather how you finish it. That's a bit misleading. It is about how you start the race; it must be by grace through faith in the right gospel. But it's equally important that you finish the race, thus proving that your initial confession was authentic. In my short lifetime, I've seen a great deal of individuals who ostensibly started their Christian life off strong. Nevertheless, after time or

tragedy they have thrown in the towel, thus proving they never belonged to the King in the first place.

But Paul writes that he presses on to make it his own, referring again to the eschatological resurrection from the dead. But notice what he says directly after this statement, *because Christ Jesus has made me his own*. Observe how Paul doesn't say that he presses on in order to be made Christ's own, but rather he presses on, due to the fact that Jesus has already made him his own. It's crucial that we don't miss this, because this is at the heart of the gospel. When studying this passage, John 10 came to mind.

...but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. -John 10:26

The Lord Jesus doesn't say you aren't my sheep because you don't believe. He explains that the reason they don't believe, is due to the fact that they aren't his sheep. Similarly, Paul isn't pressing on to cause Christ to accept him. The bible teaches that there is nothing that can be done in the flesh that would cause God to accept us. Based purely on his unconditional affection and love, he chooses to lavish his gifts on those whom he chooses.

Therefore, Paul says that he presses on to make it his own. In the original Greek there is a ting of violence in this phrase. The words make and made can literally be translated as "seized," which is language that comes from the world of war and athletics. In a battle report written by the ancient historian Herodotus, he uses the same words Paul used to describe an army's pursuit and seizure of the retreating columns of the enemy. This is no doubt an analogy of his own conversion story. As he was riding his horse to Damascus on a mission to persecute Christians, he was violently tossed off his horse by the Lord Jesus and blinded for three days. Therefore, his pursuit of the resurrection is modeled after this gritty story of salvation. Yours was just as gritty by the way. God had to violently drag you out of your sin in order to save you. The text says,

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. -John 6:44

The definition of this Greek word (*helkyo*) is "to attract powerfully, conceived of as drawing a heavy object out of something with great effort." That heavy object is us, what we are being dragged out of is sin, and the One exerting the effort is God the Father through God the Spirit. Here's another time this word is used in the New Testament.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. -Acts 16:19

Aren't you glad the God would be willing to drag us out of our sin! Paul clearly understood this, therefore his fervor to press on was equally violent.

¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. -Matthew 11:12

Paul had the “I will not be denied attitude.” Similar to that of Jacob when he was wrestling with God.

24 And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” 27 And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” 28 Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,^[a] for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

Jacob wrestled with God all night long! He too had the “I won’t be denied attitude” as well. It was violent. It was a literal physical altercation, and he came out with a broken hip. But he refused to stop pressing until he was blessed, and the result was Jacob coming out of this situation with a new identity! Paul has the same grit! He understands that this pressing may not end with a broken hip, but it may end with him in prison or even possibly martyred. Yet and still, he won’t let go until he receives his new identity in the New Heavens and Earth. Beloved, you too have been violently seized and grasped by the grace of God. Therefore, you must pursue! You must seize! Take hold of Christ everyday as he has taken hold of you. There’s no other option. But this isn’t the last mentioning of pressing.

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, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is elaborating in this text by using an athletic metaphor. The picture is one of a runner who is fixated on a singular goal, in hopes of winning the prize. “Forgetting what lies behind.” Remember the opening illustration of the runner who lost it all because he looked back, instead of pressing forward towards the finish line. This is what Paul has in mind as he pens these words. To be clear, Paul isn’t promoting some type of spiritual amnesia in this passage. This is understood, as we’ve seen him time and time again recollect past memories of his conversion and a plethora of events. This is a unique type of forgetfulness that the apostle is endorsing. It would have been easy for Paul to set his mind on his past failures or achievements and find guilt or complacency within these events. Concerning failures, Paul could have easily been seized by guilt and ultimately paralyzed by the fact he was a tool used by Satan. But rather than succumbing to such a temptation, he forgets what lies behind and strains forward. Concerning achievements, he could have easily found his contentment in the last church he planted, but this would have diminished his focus concerning the present and the future. The apostle had no shortage of achievements and discouragements to make him a prisoner of the past, but he continued to shift into the high gear of forgetfulness.

I’m willing to bet that there is some instruction here for all of us. Or am I alone? To this day I am at times plagued by decisions my younger self made or things that I was exposed to in my youth that impact me to this very day! And there’s the temptation to allow guilt to consume me based on my past failings and deficiencies. Maybe you’re here this morning and you have been carrying the weight of past failings for far too long. God the Spirit speaks to you through His Word even today saying, ‘Forget what lies behind you! If you keep looking back during this

race, you're going to stumble like John Landy. Paul wanted to make clear to his audience that he's pressing forward towards the prize.

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

I like what Peter O'Brien has to say:

[This is] a vivid word, drawn from the games, and it pictures a runner with his eyes fixed on the goal, his hand stretching out towards it, and his body bent forward as he enters the last and decisive stages of the race. Again, the present tense of the participle is appropriate, for with this verb it powerfully describes the runner's intense desire and utmost effort to reach his goal.

So, Paul is a runner not distracted by other things. He goes on to say that our citizenship is in heaven. And elsewhere he would implore the church to not set their minds on earthly things. And elsewhere that no soldier becomes entangled in civilian affairs. There are many distractions that this world has to offer to keep us from being eternally minded. Similar to what C.S. Lewis said,

Aim at Heaven and you will get Earth 'thrown in': aim at Earth and you will get neither.

The prize is the upward, or heavenward, call of God in Christ Jesus. In other words, the full and complete knowing of Christ, for whose sake everything else is counted as loss. And lastly, he addresses the Church at Philippi directly.

III Paul's Plea

¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

This is a timely text for us all. What is Paul saying? First, I think it's noteworthy to point out the importance of mindsets and thinking in this epistle. In 2:5 he tells the Philippians to "have this mind." Here he says, the mature are to "think this way," and lastly in chapter 4 he would admonish the church to "think on these things." As always, the apostle believes that correct thinking leads to right living, therefore he concludes this section by referring to their thinking. Consequently, he exhorts them to think the same way that he does, as he's expounded in previous verses. This is a good time to note that maturity isn't an absence of sin, John would agree, but rather a vulnerability and confession of that sin, and a desire to be transformed. This is precisely the frame of mind that characterizes the mature.

But Paul also adds, *and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* Here we can clearly read the friendship setting of this epistle. Paul avoids any hint of a "superior to inferior" expression of friendship between his self and the church. Therefore, on one hand, he's exhorting them to follow his example, and on the other, his exhortation in this case is not a command. And he doesn't even assume that they'll see eye to eye with him on all matters. There's a mutual respect and friendship between Paul and this church, even on issues where they disagree. Some commentators say Paul has more generalities in mind, as opposed to specifics. Either way, it's beautiful to read how they may freely disagree with him at points, and yet there's

still love between them. I try to follow this model, as I believe we all should. On certain issues, I want to make an appeal, as opposed to law, recognizing that we may still disagree at the end of the day. And guess what, that's okay. Not everyone will agree with you on certain aspects on politics, or Covid, or vaccinations, or nuances concerning social justice, you name it.

But we must exhibit grace, even amid our disagreements. Paul understood that he wasn't the Holy Spirit. But he trusted that *God will reveal that also to you*. At the end of the day, you can't change the heart of your brother and sister anyway. Trust that God the Spirit will do the work and correct your brother or sister or correct your heart.

Yet and still, there are certain issues that we must agree on. And that brings us to our final verse.

Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

In other words, despite our differences on certain matters, all of us must hold fast to the gospel and behave in conformity to the same standard. The verb, "hold true to" was originally meant "to be drawn up in a line" (especially as a military term). Paul uses it figurately, meaning to bring one's life or behavior into conformity to something. That something being the crucified life. So, he begins this particular section by reminding them of the not yet, and he ends by encouraging them of the already. He says hold true to what we have attained. Sometimes you just need a reminder of what you have attained as a reinforcement and inspiration to press on.

Believer, you have been resurrected from the dead. You heard that right, dead! The Bible makes clear that you were born like the rest of mankind, rebellious and insubordinate before the eternal God. Despite the beautiful warm and cuddly upbringing, you may have had, praise God for godly parents, you were nevertheless desperately wicked as your natural stance. Spiritually, you were in the cemetery, in the graveyard with your body decomposing and corpse rotting. But God, being rich in mercy, decided against giving you what you deserve, which is eternal death. Instead, he sent his one and only unique and eternal son, the Lord Jesus, on earth. This Jesus incarnated, passed through his own creature's uterus, and grew in both stature and wisdom. This Jesus loved the unlovable. This Jesus raised the dead. This Jesus healed the blind. This Jesus set the captives free. This Jesus proclaimed the year of Jubilee. This Jesus took a cross as the eternal punishment and wrath from his Father in your place. This Jesus drank your hellish cup of wrath. This Jesus died as a substitute. This Jesus resurrected from the dead. This Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to raise you up and seat you in heavenly places, even now! This is the spiritual resurrection that you have attained, all while waiting for the final resurrection. Glory be to God!

Let's pray.