

PRESSING TOWARD THE GOAL OF THE UPWARD CALL OF JESUS CHRIST:

Philippians 3:12-16

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I. Introduction:

- A. The diary of George Mueller, the Christian social reformer from the Victorian era, chronicles his devotion in prayer:

In Nov. 1844, I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals. I prayed every day without a singly intermission, whether sick or in health, on the land, on the sea, and whatever the pressure of my engagements might be. Eighteen months elapsed before the first of the five was converted. I thanked God and prayed on for the others. Five years lapsed, and then the second was converted. I thanked God for the second, and prayed on for the other three. Day by day, I continued to pray for them, and six years passed before the third was converted. I thanked God for the three, and went on praying for the other two. These two remained unconverted.

Thirty-six years later he wrote that the other two, sons of one of Mueller's friends, were still not converted. He wrote:

But I hope in God, I pray on, and look for the answer. They re not converted yet, but they will be.

IN 1897, fifty-two years after he began to pray, these two men were finally converted, after he died. Mueller understood what Jesus meant when he told his disciples "that they should always pray and not give up."¹

Transition:

I tell this story to you as an example of not only vital importance of prayer but here we have a man that displayed the Christian virtue of persistence. This is what I want to talk about this evening.

- B. Endurance, persistence, pressing on and striving are to be crucial virtues in our lives, esp. as it relates to doing only that which will demonstrate the most glory to God. While I am not exempt to this either, one of the most common problems believers, even believers who deeply know the Word (they have the doctrine) experience is a failure to endure with godliness "*when the waters get rough*" or with God-centered consistency.
- C. Let me unpack that last statement by using the illustration of an obstacle course.
1. There are some of us here who have extreme difficulty in overcoming just about any hurdle in the obstacle course of living life with Godly conduct. Every time we

¹ Ben Patterson, *Deepening Your Conversation with God* (Bethany, 1999), pp. 105-6.

to try to jump a hurdle we typically find ourselves failing. Any success we have is extraordinary.

2. Then there are those of us who can carry a smile, offer exquisite details of doctrinal matters, and even appear stoic when things are going well. But when we come across an obstacle, whether real or potential, we come to a screeching halt, bend over in anxiety as if we are having cramps, and perhaps complain to all those around that life isn't fair. Embarrassed, depressed, and pessimistic, we just sit there, immobilized by fear.
 3. Or maybe we are one of those who can jump over the big obstacles in life with victory, bearing beauty, grace, and precision, but when we come to those small obstacles, we find ourselves becoming faithless, angry, complainers, and perhaps miserable.
- D. Regardless where we might find ourselves, the fundamental theme in all three is a failure “to press on”; it is a failure to endure.

Transition:

- E. This evening we are going to address this issue by examining what “*pressing on*” means in Philippians 3:12-16. Afterwards we will consider how we should then live in view of this passage.

<p>II. Exposition of Philippians 3:12-16:</p>
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- A. Candidly, the apostle Paul makes a confession in Philippians 3:12. And this is where our study begins.

NET Translation:

<p><i>3:12 Not that I have already attained this-that is, I have not already been perfected-but I strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me. 3:13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded: Forgetting this things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead, 3:14 with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 3:15 Therefore let those of us who are “perfect” embrace this point of view. If you think otherwise, God will reveal to you the errors of your ways. 3:16 Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that that we have already attained.</i></p>
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- B. In verses 12 and 14 the Apostle Paul uses the word “*strive*” or “*press on*”.
- C. In English the word “*strive*” has three typical nuances:
1. to try hard to achieve or get something;
 2. to fight in opposition to something;
 3. to compete resolutely against somebody or something;

- D. Relationally, the word “*press*” in English denotes to carry on in an urgent or persistent manner. For example, “*The night was falling but they pressed on despite their weariness.*”
- E. In the Greek, the verb “*strive*” or “*press on*” is “*διώκω, diōkō*”. In the N.T. this word typically has four nuances:
1. **Pursue, follow in haste** (Matthew 23:34; Luke 17:23; Rev. 12:13).
 2. **Press forward** (Phil. 3:12, 14). In verse fourteen the word “*strive*” is used in terms of an adjectival purpose.
 3. **Persecute, to systematically oppress and harass**; it is used in Philippians 3:6 (pres. active participle) to denote Paul’s pursuit in persecuting the church when he was Saul the Pharisee (Matthew 5:10; Phil. 3:6).
 4. **Strive to, do something with an intense effort to reach a goal** (Rom. 9:30, 31; 12:13, 14; 14:19; 1 Cor. 14:1; 1 Th. 5:15; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 3:11).²
- F. Another way of seeing the *intensity* of this word is how often it is used. For example, ten times this word is used to mean persecute, persecuted (13 times), persecuting (7 times), persecuted (13 times), persecuting (7 times), persecutor (1 time)... whereas pursue is used 7 times, pursuing (2 times) practicing (1 time), press (2 times), pursue (7 times), pursuing (2 times), run after (1 time), and seek after (1 time).³
- G. Reflecting upon this Greek word (*dioko*) and its use, there is a certain irony attached to it as used by Paul. Here we have a word that is used quite a bit in Scripture to mean persecute, persecuting, or persecuted. And the same word is used of here of striving to reach the upward call of Jesus Christ. In fact, the apostle Paul, who is no stranger to persecuting believers when he was Saul, and who has been persecuted and eventually martyred as the Paul, uses this same root word. So, the idea of “*pressing forward*” or “*striving*” is no easy manner; it demands our utmost attention, concentration, determination, effort, execution, focus, planning, and strength.
- H. Interestingly, as mentioned in our examination into forgetting the past, Phil. 3:13, this word is contextually related to the Greek word picture of a runner. In verse 13 we have the word picture of a runner (stretching myself), i.e., leaning forward as he runs. He is focused, bent on winning, and every bit of muscle, energy, and attitude is bent to toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.⁴ In fact, the word “*goal*” specifically refers to the marker at the end of the race; this is where and what his eyes are fixed upon; the prize is the reward for victory which he may be using to refer to heavenly “*rewards*” or ultimate salvation in God’s presence.

²Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. GGK1503

³Thomas, Robert L.: *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition*. Anaheim : Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998, 1981, S. H8674:

⁴Robertson, A.T.: *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, 1997, S. Php 3:13

1. [rewards: βραβεῖον, *brabeion*: gift received as adj. prize or reward (adj. laurel wreath 1Co 9:24; heavenly rewards Phil. 3:14)].⁵
- I. So, in verse he is determined, fixed upon, dedicated to striving or pressing on to reach his goal with utmost perseverance. Everything is directed to reach this goal.
 - J. Having said then investigated what pressing on means, let's go back and examine the context (let's look at verse 12).
 1. In view of all that the Apostle Paul has communicated to the Philippian believers regarding his desire and determination to glorify Christ, he wants .to make sure that they don't get the impression that he has arrived.
 2. Verse12: In order to prevent that potential misunderstanding, Paul carefully confesses he has not already attained already "*maturity*" or "*perfection.*" This flows from verses 1-16 where Paul states that his credentials could not produce anything that would be pleasing to God.
 3. So, he seeks to seize Christ in the manner that Christ Has seized him. Interestingly, the phrase, to grasp, "*katalambano*" is used in the papyri of colonists appropriating land. So, he strenuously desires to lay hold of, appropriate that for which he was taken captive (overtaken; *katalambano*) by Christ Jesus on the Damascus road. Paul desired intensely that it might be fully realized in his experience. That is why I say that the Apostle Paul wants to seize Christ in the manner that Christ has seized him.
 4. In verse 13 he expands his thought in verse 12. So here we are introduced to the race metaphor: With "*single mindedness*" the apostle Paul is forgetting what lies behind, i.e., the good, the bad and, the ugly, by considering all things rubbish, a complete loss compared to Christ because he realizes that thinking about the past, whether it is failures or self accomplishments can slow the pace or even potentially control the outcome. To be sure, he is not forgetting what God has done for him in his past, but Paul knew that he could not allow his past failures and accomplishments to keep him from striving and reaching the goal.
 5. Moreover, he wants to be found *straining towards* what lay ahead, and to express this he uses another very strong word, applicable to an athletic context or a chariot race; every fiber of his being was set on the goal and purpose of his Christian life.⁶
 6. We might be able to summarize verse 15-16 by stating that past success does not remove the necessity for future striving. They are to live up to what they already have in Christ. Paul's appeal here was to maturing believers who shared his ambitions. Though, perfection is unattainable, these believers should continue to

⁵Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. GGK1092

⁶Carson, D. A.: *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. 4th ed. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA : Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, S. Php 3:15

press on. And those believers who disagree with him on this issue, the apostle trusts God to make this instruction clear to them. Therefore, in verse 16 he commands the Philippian believers to bear the same mindset, accordingly.

III. How Should We Then Live?

- A. How willing are you and I when it comes to pursuing Christ. The apostle Paul calls us to share with him in the pursuit of Christlikeness. What he wanted for himself he also wants for fellow believers. If we examine this idea of pressing on using a metaphor of race, we may consider the following principles that may assist us in adopting the same mindset as the apostle Paul.
1. “*Pressing on*” in the Christian life should have the same determination as an Olympic runner. Every ounce of energy, effort, strategy, and training should be seriously considered and used. Therefore, we need to evaluate what may be dividing up our time, energy, and resources and whatever dishonors God should be discarded and forsaken.
 2. “*Pressing on*” implies seriously asking yourself what your goal is in this life? What is driving you? Do you even have one and is it whole heartily aiming to please Christ?
 3. “*Pressing on*” may involve asking yourself if there is anything holding you back; Is it your past failures or accomplishments? If so, you need to let it go. Consider Phil. 3:13; 1 John 1:9; Col. 3 [See previous sermon on “*How to forget your past.* Phil. 3:13].”
 4. “*Pressing on*” demands that you *protect* your intimacy with Christ; too much is at stake such as your heavenly rewards, reputation, and testimony. If you do, your pace will slacken and you will be drawing on your own strength, not the strength offered to by Christ. Let me say it differently, distractions cost you.
 5. If you can’t seem to jump or pass through a particular obstacle, reach for the **BAR**:

Beseech God in prayer (remember, God is here; He is infinite & personal)
Ask for godly assistance (remember, you are not alone; we need the church).
Rest on God promises, reckoning them to be true-no matter what. For example, we have to remember that God may take us from the trouble or see us through the trouble, but he will never leave us behind enemy lines. He will never leave us or forsake us.
 6. “*Pressing on*” means adopting the same type of ambition that marked the apostle Paul...nothing less will do. Or said in the words of Swindoll, even snails reached Noah’s ark.
 7. “*Pressing on*” means involves recognizing your identity in Christ. Your significance is not found in anything or in anyone else.

8. Remember knowing Scripture does not remove the necessity of applying Scripture. But you have to know doctrine rightly in order to respond to your circumstances biblically.
9. Be leery of pride; pride produces complacency. If you become prideful, you will not finish well. Race must not be done in our strength but in being dependent upon Him.
10. Remember too that the race is not about you and me; it is about Christ living in and through us. Forgo the flash and the fans; focus on Christ; yield to Him by being obedient; always making decisions that will honor God.
11. “*Pressing on*” means not choosing to live today exactly how we lived yesterday. What I mean is sometimes we are not making a conscious choice not “*not to press on.*” Rather, we just choose to stay where we are. Perhaps it is because we prefer if not love the “*familiar*” and “*routine.*”
12. Longing to “*press on*” does not mean that we are actually pressing on. We have to be able to distinguish the difference between longing and doing something about it; pressing on requires our entire being.
13. “*Pressing on*” implies not allowing others the opportunity to rob you of your joy in the race. This is your race and you will be accountable for your conduct at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.

14. Concluding Application: “<i>Pressing on</i>” implies getting up after each fall.

The Race

“Quit!” “Give up, you’re beaten,” they shout and plead
 there’s just too much against you now, this time you can’t succeed.
 And as I start to hang my head in front of failure’s face,
 my downward fall is broken by the memory of a race.
 And hope refills my weakened will as I recall that scene,
 for just the thought of that short race rejuvenates my being.
 A children’s race, young boys, young men; how I remember well,
 excitement sure, but also fear, it wasn’t hard to tell.
 They all lined up so full of hope, each thought to win that race
 or tie for first, or if not that, at least take second place.
 Their fathers watched from off the side, each cheering for his son,
 and each boy hoped to show his dad that he would be the one.
 The whistle blew and off they went, young hearts and hopes of fire,
 to win, to be the hero there, was each young boy’s desire.
 One boy in particular, his dad was in the crowd,
 was running near the lead and thought “My dad will be so proud.”
 But as he speeded down the field across a shallow dip,
 the little boy who thought to win, lost his step and slipped.
 Trying hard to catch himself, his hands, flew out to brace,
 and mid the laughter of the crowd he fell flat on his face.

So, down he fell and with him hope, he couldn't win it now.
 Embarrassed, sad, he only wished to disappear somehow.
 But as he fell his dad stood up and showed his anxious face,
 which to the boy so clearly said, "Get up and win that race!"
 He quickly rose, no damage done, behind a bit that's all,
 and ran with all his mind and might to make up for his fall.
 So anxious to restore himself, to catch up and to win,
 his mind went faster than his legs, he slipped and fell again.
 He wished that he had quit before with one disgrace.
 "I'm hopeless as a runner now, I shouldn't try to race."
 But, in the laughing crowd he searched and found his father's face,
 that steady look that said again, "Get up and win that race!"
 So he jumped up to try again, ten yards behind the last,
 if I'm going to gain those yards, he thought, I've got to run real fast.
 Exceeding everything he had, he regained eight or ten,
 but trying so hard to catch the lead, he slipped and fell again.
 Defeat! He lay there silently, a tear dropped from his eye,
 there's no sense running anymore—three strikes I'm out—why try?
 The will to rise had disappeared, all hope had fled away,
 so far behind, so error prone, closer all the way.
 "I've lost, so what's the use," he thought, "I'll live with my disgrace."
 But then he thought about his dad, who soon he'd have to face.
 "Get up," an echo sounded low. "Get up and take your place.
 You were not meant for failure here, get up and win that race."
 With borrowed will, "Get up," it said, "you haven't lost at all,
 for winning is not more than this; to rise each time you fall."
 So, up he rose to run once more, and with a new commit,
 he resolved that win or lose, at least he wouldn't quit.
 So far behind the others now, the most he'd ever been,
 still he gave it all he had and ran as though to win.
 Three times he'd fallen stumbling, three times he rose again.
 Too far behind to hope to win, he still ran to the end.
 They cheered the winning runner as he crossed, first place;
 head high and proud and happy—no falling, no disgrace.
 but, when the fallen youngster crossed the line, last place,
 the crowd gave him the greater cheer for finishing the race.
 And even though he came in last with head bowed low, unproud,
 you would have thought he'd won the race, to listen to the crowd.
 And to his dad he sadly said, "I didn't do so well."
 To me, you won," his father said. "You rose each time you fell."
 And now when things seem dark and hard and difficult to face,
 the memory of that little boy helps me in my own race.
 For all of life is like that race, with ups and downs and all.
 And all you have to do to win is rise each time you fall.
 "Quit!" "Give up, you're beaten," they still shout in my face,
 but another voice within me says, "Get up and win that race."