

Perseverance: Pressing on to the Goal

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[0 : 00] Philippians chapter 3. Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.

It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in the flesh.

Though I myself have reasons for such confidence, if someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.

Circumstised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

[1 : 17] But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

I want to know Christ. Yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection of the dead.

Not that I've already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

[2 : 53] All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things, and if on some point you think differently, that, too, God will make clear to you.

Only, let us live up to what we have already attained. Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

For, as I have often told you before, and now tell you even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their God is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.

Their mind is set on earthly things, but our citizenship is in heaven, 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 our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you. Thank you. Very good to be with you again after a gap of many years.

[4 : 34] Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Living Lord Jesus, as we read your word together, we ask that you will speak to our hearts by your Spirit, and that you will teach us so that our lives may be more like yours.

and we pray it in your name. Amen. I stood here and spoke on this passage of Scripture almost 30 years ago on the 18th of September, 1994.

before I looked at my old notes. The first thing I noticed was the small size of the print, which I would struggle to read now, and that's because, to put it bluntly, I'm 30 years closer to death than I was then.

The context of this letter is the prospect of death. Paul is in prison, in chains for Christ.

[6 : 11] While he's sure that ultimately he is safe in God, he's unsure whether he'll be released or whether he'll be executed. And the prospect of impending death makes him focus on what's most important in his life and what's most important for his readers.

He opens his heart and he talks about his attitudes to life and his motivations. It's intensely personal.

So what he writes in this letter can help us focus on what is most important for our lives, knowing Christ as our Lord and living a Christ-shaped life, being on track to be made like him in his resurrection, receiving God's gift of renewed bodily life when he renews this damaged world in which we live and in which we die.

So this passage is all about focus and priorities. It was Samuel Johnson in the 18th century who said, Depend upon it, sir.

When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully. He wasn't referring to the apostle Paul in prison, but to a disgraced Anglican clergyman who'd been convicted of a loan scam and sentenced to be hanged.

[7 : 59] But many people have said that a great advantage of a brush with death is that it makes them think about what's really important in their lives.

A man was sitting at my kitchen table a few weeks ago telling me about his life. His name's Luke. Luke had a very unusual upbringing. His father was both a communist and a Buddhist.

His mother described herself as a white witch and practiced whatever it is that white witches do. His parents separated when he was only four.

Growing up, he decided that he would keep well away from all forms of religion, having seen what it did to his parents, and he would be an atheist. Then, one day, when he was 17, something happened.

He'd been out partying with friends, walking home at 3 a.m. He was attacked by four men, beaten up, stabbed in the head with a screwdriver, stabbed three times in the back with a knife, severely injured.

[9 : 16] He said to me, after he was discharged from hospital, he found himself wondering how come I'm still alive? Why am I still alive?

What's my life for? What's the purpose of my life? To refocus our lives, it's not necessary to have our own brush with death.

We can learn from someone else who looked it in the face. This morning, we can learn from Paul. So, Paul starts with an instruction and a warning.

Verse 1, rejoice in the Lord. Verse 2, watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. Strong language.

Paul has in mind the Judaizers, the people who are going around teaching the non-Jews, like those living in Philippi, that it wasn't enough to give your allegiance to Christ.

[10 : 23] You must also observe the Jewish laws, which for men, started with being circumcised. For men, circumcision was the ancient sign of belonging to God's special people.

But in Christ, all are invited, Jew or non-Jew. And through Christ, all can be brought into right relationship with God.

So, Paul, as a Jew himself, adapts and reapplies. He reverses some conventional language. Dogs was a Jewish insult for non-Jews, Gentiles.

Paul says, the Judaizers are the dogs. Evildoers was how Jews saw Gentiles. Paul says, the Judaizers are the evildoers.

Mutilators, he calls them, because they want to cut men's flesh to initiate them into the Jewish law. But Paul says, verse 3, it is we, he and his Gentile brothers and sisters, we who are the circumcision.

[11 : 28] God's people are no longer marked out by physical circumcision, but by the experience of the Holy Spirit who enables us to serve God and we boast in Christ Jesus.

So, Paul's contrasting two groups, the Judaizers and those who truly follow Jesus. The Judaizers exult in flesh and put their confidence in it, in their proud compliance with the external ceremonies of the ancient law.

But Jesus has come, the one to whom the ancient law looked forward. The old ceremonies have fulfilled their purpose. They're no longer needed. It's Jesus that we need and only Jesus.

So the followers of Jesus rejoice in the Lord. They exult in him. what's all that got to do with us? In the year 2023, we don't have a problem of Judaizers downgrading Jesus and telling us that we must keep the observances of the ancient Jewish law.

Do we? But there is an enduring lesson here and it's a lesson about self-righteousness. Verses 4 to 6, Paul describes his own self-righteousness.

[12 : 50] If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

His focus was all on himself. Pride in his physical descent, his circumcision, his religious observances, his zeal, that's what he exalted in.

But when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was being stoned to death for speaking up for Jesus, Paul was there giving his approval to murder.

Appalling behavior. But because of his focus on himself, his ethnic pride, his achievements, his own righteousness, he saw himself as faultless, a murderer, faultless.

But verse seven, whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. He met Christ and his whole outlook changed.

[14 : 29] He saw that all his self-righteousness counted for nothing. He saw how utterly in the wrong he was. Jesus came to him in a vision on the Damascus road and addressed him by his Jewish name, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

That encounter turned his perspectives upside down and utterly changed his priorities. So now, as he says in verses eight to nine, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

all his plus points, all his self-righteousness, all garbage compared with knowing Christ and being found in him.

And that might remind us of Jesus' own words in John 17, praying to his father, this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you've sent.

[16 : 02] so Paul, he'd been lost in self-righteousness, but now was found in Christ. The righteousness that he received meant being in the right with God.

It's a gift from God, a gift given to those who come over onto God's side through Christ in faith, and faith means trusting him, giving him our allegiance as our Lord.

So as Paul discovered, there's nothing in life that's more important than knowing Jesus Christ as our Lord. And that will mean following him in a life that's shaped by the life of Jesus himself, a Christ-shaped life.

Jesus himself spoke about this need for reorientation concerning what's lost and what's gained. Mark chapter 8.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it.

[17 : 17] But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? people. There's no one like Jesus.

If we're really going to be his followers, we have to take seriously what he says about how to follow him. I believe you may have looked at chapter 2 last week.

In chapter 2 of this letter to the Philippians, Paul has spoken about the shape of Jesus' life. Chapter 2, verse 6. being in very nature God, he didn't consider equality with God something to be used as advantage.

Rather, verses 7 and 8, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Therefore, verses 9 to 11, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that's above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[18 : 33] So then in chapter 3, Paul says how his own life has changed to become Christ-shaped. Verses 5 and 6, he was speaking of his self-righteousness which could never lift him up to God.

And in verses 7 to 9, he says he lost all things for the sake of Christ. He went down. What did he lose when he turned to Jesus?

He lost something of his identity, his status, his worth as a devout Pharisee, because he saw that it all counted for nothing, and that something else was of surpassing worth.

And that something else was to know Christ, to be found in him, to have God's approval, because he's now in Christ.

And that's why Paul says in verse 10 that he wants to know the resurrection power of Christ in his present experience, and that he participates in Christ's sufferings, becoming like Christ in his death.

[19 : 50] That means he's walking the humble way, taking up his cross daily, stepping out in obedience and trust, and experiencing God's power in his weakness.

He's taking the hits that come with following Jesus. He's shaping his life on Jesus' life. He's looking forward to the future resurrection.

He's not claiming to have arrived, but he's pressing on, as he says in verses 12 to 14, using the metaphor of athletics race, straining towards the finish line to win the prize.

So we have before us the shape of Paul's example, which is patterned on the shape of Christ's example. Paul says in verse 17, join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

So it's not just Paul, there are others who live their lives patterned on Christ, the Christ-shaped pattern of humility and loving service to others.

[21 : 09] Perhaps he's thinking of his colleagues, Timothy, Paphroditus, mentioned in the letter. But what about us? We're not traveling apostles, we're not first century missionaries, the circumstances of our lives are nothing like Paul's or his co-workers.

So what does it mean in practice for us to know Christ, to be found in him, to participate in his sufferings, and to live in the hope of the resurrection from the dead?

Well, here's a question that each of us could consider. How would Jesus live my life in my circumstances Monday to Sunday?

Again, I'll say it. How would Jesus live my life in my circumstances Monday to Sunday? Sunday? With that question hanging in the air, let's look at the last four verses of our passage.

For as I've often told you before and now tell you again, even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction. Their God is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.

[22 : 34] Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. 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 our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

The people Paul has in mind in verses 18 and 19 are not living their lives as Jesus would live them.

Their lives, their minds, are set on what they want here and now. Their God is their stomach. In other words, what's most important to them, what rules them, is their appetites.

their own desires. You could say they're living the short story of self gratification. A story that ends with destruction if that's how they continue.

Paul invites us to live instead the long story of Christ as our Lord and Savior. The story that ends with life and resurrection in the last two verses, 20 and 21, he's making an allusion that they will well understand to Philippi's status as a Roman colony.

[24 : 10] In the Roman setup, Caesar is Lord. And Caesar is supposedly, so it was said, the savior of the world. if a colony is embattled or struggling, it needs Caesar to come with his armies and his attendance and his resources and set everything right.

While the Philippian believers live in a Roman colony, they may be Roman citizens, but they've given their highest allegiance to a different lord, a lord who is far above Caesar, a lord who's bringing a full and final salvation that Caesar can never provide, Jesus, the true king.

In this present time, as Paul writes to them, they may struggle, they may be embattled, they may participate in suffering according to the pattern of Christ, but they can receive resurrection power to keep on keeping on, living as citizens of his kingdom, looking forward to the day when the true king returns to set everything right.

That's how Paul is inviting us to live. You may wonder what happened to Luke with his questions about his life after his brush with death.

The next year he went to college. He met a young woman who'd grown up in a Christian home but had backslidden. Fiona was not interested in him, but she was thinking of trying out going to church again and wanted someone to go with, so they went together.

[26 : 07] He was still hungry for purpose, for making sense of his life. He began hearing at church the message of Jesus. He bought a Bible, read it right through.

He found his purpose in turning to Jesus, the Lord, and serving him. Now Luke is a Baptist pastor and Fiona is his wife.

So be encouraged. God is still at work, even, or perhaps especially, through difficult experiences, where death hangs over like a shadow.

Jesus is still really Lord. There's nothing as valuable as knowing him and walking his way of humble love and service.

Jesus is and here's a question for tomorrow morning. How would Jesus live my life?