

Pressing forward

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[0 : 00] to the passage of scripture we read in Philippians chapter 3, but looking especially at verses 12 to 14. Philippians 3, reading at verse 12.

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

We could say that Paul was a perfectionist, but we'd better explain what we mean by that. If by perfectionist we mean the kind of person who's very picky about everything, who needs to have everything in the right place, who's study's always tidy, no loose books lying about, shoes always polished, collar always tidy, we don't know.

Maybe Paul was like that. Or maybe he was that kind of genius that you sometimes find, we know he was a spiritual genius as taught by God, but many people who are geniuses are not tidy, they're not perfectionists in that sense.

[1 : 26] We simply don't know anything about him with regard to that aspect of his life. But he was a perfectionist, if you define perfectionist, by being or seeking to be like Christ.

Christ is perfect. And the Bible tells us and God assures us that his aim for us, his goal in our redemption, and it's something that he will inevitably achieve, is that we will be like Christ.

And indeed, Paul finishes this chapter by referring to that. Our citizenship, or our place of citizenship is in heaven. We're looking for the Savior, we're eagerly expecting the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is going to change our vile body, or the body of our present humiliation, this body we presently have, so that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body.

The destiny of God's people is to be in the image of God's Son, as Romans 8 puts it. And that's what God is set on achieving and will achieve.

And that's the kind of perfectionist that Paul was. He had set his mind on this Christ-likeness. His goal in life was to be as like his Savior as he could possibly be in this life.

[3 : 04] And he saw the Christian life entirely in those terms. That's why he says here in the first chapter of this epistle, in verse 21, for me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

His life is entirely dominated by one thing or one person. And because it's dominated by that one person of Christ, it's dominated too by one thing associated with that.

And that is to be like him. And what he's telling us here is that he's not yet attained to that. He's not yet attained to that perfection.

He's saying, I'm not yet perfect, not as though I had already attained or were already perfect. Now he's been talking about and giving this testimony, as you well know, the things that he once thought were really to his advantage spiritually, spiritually, God taught him or Christ taught him that they were just worthless.

In fact, they were offensive to God because the sum total of them was self-righteousness. And when God taught him that that self-righteousness was something that attracted the displeasure of God, Paul says, I threw that away.

[4 : 22] I had no option. So that I might gain Christ. So that I might be found in him. So that I might know him.

And the power of his resurrection. So that I might be set on this way. That I might attain at last to the resurrection of the dead. To that perfection. But now he's saying, not that I've yet attained that perfection.

And as we come to begin a new year, we can follow the thinking of the apostle and try and take it with us into this new year.

Because essentially, what Paul is dealing with in these verses is the Christian doctrine of perseverance. And the Christian doctrine of perseverance is among the most important that our reformers and forefathers and those who set our creeds and our catechisms and our standards in that respect.

They included the perseverance of the saints among the important elements that we have in our doctrines. And he's dealing with that perseverance in a way that we can see under three headings. [5 : 35] It first of all tells us something about what Paul is as he writes these verses to the Corinthians. What he is. Secondly, we read here of something that Paul is not or some things that Paul is not.

What Paul is not. And thirdly, we read here of what Paul is actually doing. What he is, what he is not, and what he's doing.

So what is he? Well, the first thing that strikes us is that he is a man possessed by Christ. He's a man under the ownership of Christ.

He's a man to whom Christ has revealed himself in such a way that has actually taken hold of his life. You see the words that he's using there in verse 12. That if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Jesus Christ.

When you apprehend someone, you arrest them, you take them into custody. And in a spiritual sense, that's what's happened to Paul. What happened to Paul to Saul of Tarsus on the way to Damascus?

[6 : 46] What do you read in the book of Acts regarding his conversion? Well, there's lots of details to it. But he's kind of summarizing it for us here. And what he's saying really effectively is this Jesus Christ that I was set on actually destroying or at least his cause and his church and his people and I was on the way to do more of that.

This Jesus Christ then actually met me and what he did is he reached down, he came to me and he took me into his custody. He took hold of my life.

He brought me into his own ownership. He apprehended me. He took hold of me. And you know that's the illogical outcome of redemption in Christ.

Why did Christ die? What's the purpose of Christ's death and resurrection? What was that to achieve? Nothing less than this and all that follows on from it.

It's as if Christ is pictured as someone who has come down. He had literally met with Paul, of course, on the way to Damascus with this flashing, blinding light of his glory, meeting Paul on the way.

[8 : 00] But he's saying here that as he apprehended him, so it was pretty much the same as Christ saying to him, look, I paid the price of your sin and you can no longer remain in the prison of sin and of darkness and of death and I'm here to take you out.

I'm here to take hold of you and to take you out of that imprisonment and take you under my ownership and my custody and to make you my servant. Is that how you're beginning this new year?

Who owns your life? Under whose direction are you facing 2015? How will you meet the difficulties that come your way in 2015?

In your own strength? With custody as you think of your own life? With things under your own control? Not if you follow the apostle?

That's all gone. That's all behind him. These days are past. The days when he thought he was in charge of manufacturing his righteousness for God to approve of.

[9 : 10] No, he's now saying, I'm looking to the future under the ownership of Christ. I've been apprehended by him. He's under his ownership.

And you know, there's such a tremendous motivation for the apostle. As you read his writings, one of the great things that motivates this man is the very fact that he's owned by Christ.

From that ownership which he's not involved in reluctantly, which he is willingly a part of, which he has willingly given himself to, as God has worked in his life, from that, he wants to please Jesus, to be like Jesus, to be with Jesus at last.

For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. That's what Paul is. Before we ever ask, what are we doing?

As we begin a new year, we have to ask ourselves, myself and yourself, what am I? What is my life? How am I facing the future?

[10:22] What am I in myself? What am I spiritually? What am I morally? Where am I standing? How am I in my relationship with God? How do I connect with eternity?

That's the most important thing. Before you ever ask, what am I doing? Or what should I be doing? Ask, what am I? Where am I standing? This man says, I am owned by Christ.

I've been apprehended by him. I'm willingly in his ownership, under his custody, under his direction, under his lordship, and I don't want to be anywhere else.

Secondly, what Paul is not. Not, he says, as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after, if that I may apprehend, that for which also I've been apprehended of Christ Jesus.

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended. He's not already perfect. And, you see, the interesting way he's putting it is this.

[11:27] He's saying that Jesus took hold of him as a person to enable him, then, to take hold of something particularly important. Jesus took hold of his life so that Paul would be enabled to take hold of eternal life.

The apprehending with which Jesus took hold of his life was that which led to Paul actually now pressing towards the very thing for which Jesus took hold of him and apprehended him so that Paul would grasp this eternal life, this resurrection life, this life with Christ in glory.

And that's what he's doing, so we'll see in a minute, but what he is not is already perfect. He's not already attained that, but he's actually seeking to make it my own.

You could translate the verse there, seeking, but I follow after if that I may make my own, that I may really have full possession of the thing for which Jesus took possession of my life.

That's the prize that he's referring to here, the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. It's so important in life to have goals, to have aspirations.

[13:03] But we don't go along with the worldly philosophy that says, go for it and you'll get it. Go for it and you'll attain it. Give yourself to it, whatever it is. If it's in your heart, if it's in your mind to do it, just go for it and you'll attain to it.

Just keep at it. That's the world's philosophy. That's the way in which the world thinks without commitment to Christ, without commitment to the Lordship of Christ.

That's not what this man is counseling us at all, but he is actually saying, it's so important to have a goal, a special goal, a proper goal, but particularly this goal, the goal of attaining at last the life for which Christ took hold of him.

Is that your objective tonight? That my objective? Is something else more important to us than that? What is your goal in this coming year as long as God will spare you in it?

What are your objectives? What's your priority? What's the most important thing for you to achieve? So many different answers to that question.

[14:23] If you would carry out a survey of different people, you would find a whole host of questions. What's the most important thing to this man? What's the most important thing as Paul is giving us his testimony here?

Well, he's saying, this is the most important thing for me. I am actually pressing towards this mark, this prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. I am setting out daily to actually reach towards the very thing for which Jesus took hold of my life.

He has the right goal. He has that as his objective. He knows that's why Jesus took hold of him. He knows that's what it means to be a Christian, yes, along with many other things.

But this is really the driving, energetic, powerful source of his motivation, that he's under the ownership of Christ, and that that means there's something ahead of him that Christ has promised him at the end of the journey.

And while he's in this life, and not yet perfect, that's what he's going to set out to press towards, so that at last he will have it.

[15:33] Paul is owned by Christ and motivated by that fact. Paul is not yet perfect.

Paul has not yet reached the thing for which Christ took hold of him, but yet with his motivation as it is, that's what he's reaching toward, that's what he has in view, that's what he has made his goal.

And that brings us, thirdly, to what Paul is doing. Because he's saying here, Brethren, I count not myself to apprehended, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and

reaching forth to those things which are ahead, I am pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

He's saying, I'm pressing on. It's so important to him. He has to put it in those terms. I am pressing on.

He's not relaxed about it. Not casual about it. He's not saying, well, I'm now on the right track and Jesus will take care of everything for me and there's not much for me to do.

[16:49] No, he's saying to the same Philippians earlier on in the epistle, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

You cannot do it without God. You cannot create it for yourself. But with God working in you, it doesn't mean you have nothing to do. From what God is doing in you comes what we have to work out.

And working out is precisely what Paul is doing in these verses. He's working out his salvation. He's pressing towards the mark. He's saying, I cannot afford to treat this lightly.

It's just too vital a thing. It's the thing for which Jesus gave his life. It's the thing for which he apprehended me. It's the thing for which he brought me under his control.

And you notice he's saying here, one thing I do. This one thing I do. It's almost as if he's saying to us, nothing else really matters.

[17:55] Of course, he's not really saying that. There are lots of things that matter to the apostle. The state of the churches, the condition of these Christians, the persecution. Some of them are going through as he writes these letters in the New Testament that you find in the New Testament.

There are so many things that the apostle says are important to him and are a burden to him. But here he's saying, with regard to this matter for which Jesus has brought him under his control, this one thing I do.

He's single-minded about it. He's not being deflected from it. He's not going to be diverted from it. He's not going to be tempted away from it. He's not going to lose his focus over it.

This one thing I'm doing. What's the most important thing for myself and yourself this first Sabbath of a new year?

What's the one thing that you would single out you have to be doing over and above everything else? Well, surely it's this one. This one thing I'm doing, I am pressing on towards this mark, towards what Jesus has in store for me.

[19:16] So often, the things that we have as our goals will disappoint us. especially if there are things of this world, some of the goals we have, even if there are things of this world, they're not wrong to have, but it's wrong to place all our trust in them.

They're going to disappoint. They're going to be sometimes things which will lead to disillusionment and surprise and heartbreak.

But Paul says, what I have as my goal will never disappoint me. It doesn't belong to this world. It's the thing for which Jesus brought me into his custody.

It's the prize of the high calling of God, the heavenly calling of God in Christ Jesus. And there are two things that he says belong to this pressing on.

And as you come to this, we'll see that he's using the language of athletics. There are two things. He's forgetting the things which are behind and at the same time, he's stretching forward to those things which are ahead.

[20:36] And you have to have those two things side by side. They're not alternatives. They're not things that the apostle is doing. Sometimes he's doing one and sometimes he's doing the other. He's doing both at the same time.

He's forgetting the things that are behind and he's pressing forward towards the things that are ahead. The things that are behind in his life. The things that have been in his life up to then. He is forgetting them in the sense of moving on from them.

Of course, he's not meaning that he's forgetting them in the sense of no longer thinking about them at all in any sense. But what he means by forgetting is that he's not making them a hindrance to his progress.

He's not looking at them in such a way as is so filled with regrets and things like that that they're actually beginning to entangle him in his pressing on. Hebrews chapter 12 gives us a great picture and illustration of the Christian life as a race that we have to run.

And it begins by saying that having been surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses as if we're in a stadium surrounded by all those people in chapter 11 who have finished their race and have gone to take their place in those who no longer run the race and are looking on around us in the stadium as used to be the case with these old Greek games.

[22 : 04] He's saying surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily besets us and let us run with perseverance or with patience it's really the word perseverance let us run the race with perseverance that is set before us looking unto Jesus.

When you find an athlete coming to the final lap and hears the bell whatever position he's got in the race even if he's right at the head of the race as he hears or she hears that bell their thoughts are not going back to three or four laps previously and where they were then their thoughts are actually on that final lap as they've entered into it and as they're heading towards the finishing tape forgetting those things which are behind not letting the things behind hinder them I press on towards the mark you know we can have many things as we look back over life that cause a hindrance to us or get in the way of our proper spiritual progress such things as regrets that we have things we regretted we did in the past things we regretted we did not do in the past regret over the way things were handled by us or done by us or not done by us and the devil can actually bring these things before us with such force that he will actually blow up these regrets and make us focus on them so much that they will actually be like weights hindering you in the process of moving ahead and that's true especially for some people with specific sins that they know they committed even before they were converted and came to know

Christ and even now after they're converted as they look back they still find times when regret fills their mind and it troubles them that they ever did such things and it becomes a great stumbling block until they can get some way over that there's a true story about a missionary in the Philippines at one time many years back and he was troubled about a specific sin that he had committed frequently while he was in seminary he was a Christian God had forgiven him and yet he just couldn't get this out of his mind and it troubled him frequently this one specific sin that he was prone to and it troubled him from time to time and there's a woman in the congregation there who was a godly woman and who claimed to have visitations from Jesus

Christ where he spoke to her and where she spoke to him and where he answered her back and the missionary wasn't very happy about that he didn't really think that was such a good thing so he said well I'll test this woman what I'll do is I'll ask her if next time she meets Jesus that way will she ask him to tell her what this sin was that was so prominent in my life in the past so he met her short time after he said have you still meetings with Jesus yes she said well the next time you meet him he said I want you to ask him something ask him to tell you the sin that I had in my life while I was in seminary and see what he says she said I will and some time after that they met again missionary asked her have you had any more visits from Jesus yes she said I have have you spoken to him yes did you ask him about the thing

I left with you to show you to tell you about this sin oh yes indeed she said I did say it to him just like you asked me to and did he say something in reply did he answer you oh yes indeed what did he say said the missionary well the woman said he said this I don't remember I don't remember that's God speaking over the forgiveness of your sins I don't remember and if he doesn't remember them and if we are fully justified as we are in Christ Jesus with his righteousness isn't that what the apostle is saying here that he has in fact come through the grace of God to come to the righteousness which is of God by faith the righteousness that is by faith in Christ Jesus why should sins in the past trouble him they don't why should any of us have such regrets and such times when we are filled with things that hinder us when we know that God takes care of all our sin and all our wants and all our doings in the past as well as in the present and in the future

[27 : 19] I forget he says the things that are in the past in that sense I don't regard them as things now to be considered in a way that hinders me in making progress so if you are prone to having that sort of hindrance having these regrets come back to you and flooding into your mind and sometimes Satan taking hold them and saying well if you were really a Christian and if all of these sins had really been forgiven on God you wouldn't feel such regret over them well think about this you have to distinguish regret from feeling shame over sin sin the apostle the apostle wrote to the Romans and one of the things he said to them was what fruit did you then have when you were not Christians before you were converted what fruit did you have then in those things of which you are

now ashamed you see sin does not completely disappear from a

Christian's life or consciousness or experience even though it is completely forgiven by God because the nature of sin and what sin is is increasingly understood as we go on in the Christian life and the more you begin to understand of the workings of sin of the evil of sin of the nature of sin inevitably you and I will have thoughts going back to our previous days when the shame of what we were as unforgiven unconcerned sinners the shame of what we did against God will hit us it doesn't mean we're not forgiven it does mean that we now have an understanding of sin that we never had then but it must not hinder our progress forgetting those things which are behind and the other side of it is straining forward reaching forward to the things which are ahead which are before

I press towards the mark like we said it's just the language of athletics there's the athlete coming into the final straight seeing the finishing tape ahead and hearing the bell and just the more he comes towards or she comes towards that finishing tape you know yourselves what athletes do when they come within reaching distance of that tape if they really want to win that race you'll find their practice is just to strain themselves forward to bend their chests forward because it's as the chest goes through the line that is shown up on whoever it is that's examining the photo that looks at the finishing line it's the chest that goes through first that marks the winner I strain I press towards the mark I'm reaching the finishing tape so he says this is what I'm doing like an athlete in the final meters of a race straining towards the tape

I am pressing onwards towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus what is your objective what is your present practice how concerned are you to finish your life well how concerned are you that when your life finishes you will go as Paul says here to be with Christ which is far better and you know the great thing is there is no first second and third at the end of the Christian race there is no gold and silver and bronze medal given out they are all gold everyone gets eternal life that is what Jesus died to achieve and nothing short of that will be the portion of the apostle that is why he is straining forward to it with such relish and with such excitement the final book of the Bible and almost final words of the Bible really but it's in chapter three as you know the final book of the

Bible begins with three chapters that comprise seven letters written to seven churches and the final letter the letter to Laodicea the Lord does much to say with regard to how things are wrong in Laodicea each of these letters concludes with a promise and it's a promise to him who overcomes to the person who reaches the finishing tape and crosses it to the one who perseveres to the end as Jesus says in Matthew 24 verses 11 to 13 when he's talking there about false prophets that will arise and lead many astray but he that endure to the end shall be saved that's what Paul is busy doing persevering pressing on seeking to endure to the end using everything that God has given him and friends what a great advantage we have in the gospel and in our gospel setting in this island that we have freely available to us the means the tools that God has given us so that we can be like

[33 : 12] Paul pressing on towards the mark but what is the final promise at the end of Revelation 3 well it's this to him that overcomes I will grant to sit with me in my throne even as I also overcame and am set down with my father in his throne the greatest perseverer was Jesus himself he overcame for his people and his promise to his people as those who will overcome is that they will actually sit with him in his throne that they will share in his victory even as he overcame and is set with his father in his throne we couldn't have a greater objective in this new year we couldn't have a more important one we couldn't have a clearer one but are we too like the apostle making it our own are we pressing towards the mark for the prize of that high calling of

God in Christ Jesus if eternal life is worth having it's worth this one thing on our behalf on our part to press toward it while we're in this life may God bless his word to us let's pray happy