

The "Essential" of Perseverance

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together this evening to Philippians chapter 3, a passage that will be very familiar to those who are doing the Discipleship Explored course, because this is one of the passages that came up last time as we looked at that together.

So, verses 12 to 14 particularly this evening. But Paul says, Was Paul a perfectionist? Well, it depends what we mean by that word which has different meanings as we use it. If by perfectionist you mean the kind of person who is always tidy, whose desk is never a mess, who makes sure that his shirt is never creased, that the line in his shirt is always in the right place, that he never goes out without making sure that everything is really very much in place.

Somebody who is very pernickety about every aspect of life. If that's what you mean by perfectionist, then we don't know. He may have been that.

It's very likely he wouldn't have had much time to be that sort of perfectionist. But if you mean by perfectionist, somebody who aspired to be like Jesus Christ, then yes, Paul was a perfectionist.

[1 : 58] That was his goal. That was his aim. That was what he was straining towards, as this passage really shows us. To be like Jesus Christ in his life now.

Yes, to serve Jesus Christ in his life now. Yes, in this world. But this passage brings us to Paul's desire towards taking hold of the resurrection glory that Christ has in store for him.

Which is why you find this in verse 21, that this is what he and others are waiting for. They are aware of their citizenship or the place that they belong to, the city they belong to, is in heaven.

And from it we are awaiting a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He's given him the full title significantly. Who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.

By the power that enables him to subject all things to himself. So Paul is going so far as to say that his aim and his ambition as a Christian is for even his body eventually.

[3 : 15] On the other side of the resurrection. That's what he's aiming at in verse 10 there as we've read through the passage. This is why he considers all things now but lost that he once thought were gained to him.

The life that sought to please God by his own efforts, by his own works. He was quite confident that that was the way to God's acceptance. Now he's put it behind him.

Why has he put it behind him? Because he realized the bankruptcy and the offensiveness of that self-righteousness which really that was.

And he considers it now but rubbish, worthless in the presence of God. And he's put it behind him so that he could have instead Christ and his righteousness.

And if he says, by all means possible that I might attain to the resurrection of the dead or from the dead. That's the final terminus.

[4 : 12] That's where he wants to end that. And in this life that's what he's straining towards. So we're looking tonight at another essential.

And this time it's the essential of perseverance. It's a great Christian doctrine in itself. It's something that arises from the teaching of the Bible when you put it all together in terms of what a Christian is and how a Christian lives.

One of the things that characterizes a true Christian is perseverance. Perseverance on in following Christ in seeking ultimately to be like him in heaven.

And to be with him in heaven. And Jesus himself said in Matthew chapter 24 and verses 11 to 13.

If you quickly look at these, the context there is in regard to the final things and the coming of Christ back again to the world.

[5 : 15] But in verses 11 to 13 of chapter 24 of Matthew, this is what he says. He says that many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

In other words, salvation really is more than just saying just now, yes, I have been saved.

Somebody asked a bishop at one time, knowing that some bishops were prone probably to being liberal and didn't really fully accept everything the Bible said.

But anyway, this person went to this certain bishop and put a question to him. Sir, are you saved? And he answered it this way, am I saved?

Yes, I have been saved. I am being saved. And I shall be saved. Because salvation, you see, is something that has happened in one sense that God, as Paul is saying here to Jesus, took hold of him and changed his life.

[6 : 32] He saved him. He's a saved person. But he's being saved because he's got a work to do himself in regard to the working out of that salvation, as it's put there in chapter 2, verses 12 to 13.

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. There is to be a certain persevering activity on our part in reaching towards our final salvation, which will not be till after the resurrection in heaven.

And that's what Paul is saying. Up to that, right up to the end of my life in this world, I am pressing on towards the final aspect of my salvation, which will be in heaven after the resurrection.

He's doing everything possible that he has in his life, using everything God has given him in order to persevere, to progress onwards in his life.

And as we'll see, he's using some athletic type of language. Language borrowed from athletics, which Paul was very much aware of. And he uses elsewhere in his writings in the New Testament.

[7 : 46] And here we'll see that he's using the thing that you see there in athletes competing in a race just as they're coming into the final few meters of the race.

Whether it's a sprint or even a longer endurance race. You'll notice that every time they come really within sight of the finishing tape, just in the final few meters, there's this straining of themselves, pushing themselves, not just physically, but sticking out their chests and really wanting to be the first across that line.

So that's what it means. Pressing forward, really just reaching forward towards that finishing tape. And until he's reached it, that's what he's going to be doing in a spiritual sense.

In other words, there are two sides to that persevering. There's the one side, as we mentioned in chapter 2, verses 12 to 13. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who is working in you, both to will and to work of his good pleasure. Paul's not suggesting that we earn salvation.

[9 : 01] That we obtain salvation by pleasing God by what we do, so that he's obliged then to give us salvation as a reward. What he's saying is, God is already at work in you.

You cannot persevere unless you're already a Christian. Unless you already have God working in you. That's where everything begins from. That's the explosion of new life and energy that comes through being born again by the Holy Spirit.

That's us setting us on our way heavenwards. And once we are set on our way heavenwards, we go on working out that salvation. Using the means that God has given us to progress, to move on, to make further progress in our spiritual race.

And just to give us all the encouragement we need. That's why he said, it's not ultimately depending on your own ability. Though you have to do this, because it is God who is at work in you.

That's where you draw your strength and your energy from. It's not your own energy. It's the energy of God working in you.

[10 : 10] To will and to work of his good pleasure. So these are the two sides to it. There's God working in. And ultimately, perseverance from our perspective is our working out.

From what God is doing working in. And that's really what we want to focus on in this passage in chapter 3. This perseverance from our perspective. From our doing side of it, if you like.

And what he says here, we can summarize in three things. First of all, Paul tells us what he is. What is Paul? Well, he is firstly owned by Jesus Christ.

He says there in verse 12, I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. How did Christ Jesus make Paul his own?

How did he bring this man, this man who was so much an enemy of Jesus and so much committed to destroying the church of Jesus, as you read in the first chapters of the book of Acts, until God, until Paul was taken hold of by this Jesus that he was so eager and zealous against?

[11 : 22] What made the big change? How did things change? Well, you remember his conversion on the road to Damascus. He was going with further orders to do more damage to the church of Jesus Christ.

And Jesus Christ met him. And what he says here is that Jesus took hold of him. He actually made me his own. He took a hold of me. He apprehended me. You could say he arrested him.

He took him into his custody. He took him under his ownership. He made him his own. All of that comes into what happened on the way to Damascus.

But you see, that's really the outcome of redemption. We saw this morning something of the main details of redemption. That redemption is God taking back what we are as lost sinners, taking us back to himself.

[12 : 28] And how that was through Jesus Christ paying the price of our sin, which is called the ransom price in the Bible. He ransomed us from the power of sin, from the power that sin is in our lives, in order to bring us back to himself.

And you could say that that account you have in Acts, really, of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is pretty much Jesus, as it were, coming down to Paul, stopping him in his tracks, actually bringing to an end this destructive commitment of his to destroy the church.

And it's as if Jesus is saying to him, Now, Paul, I have paid the price of your sin, so I am here to take you into custody. I have done for you what you could never do for yourself.

I have taken your sin. I have paid the price of it. It has been at the cost of my life. I have given my life. I have died for you. So I am now taking hold of you.

I am going to give you what I died to achieve for you. That's really the picture that Paul has in mind. He has made me his own.

[13 : 44] He's brought me under his ownership. He's made me one of his. He's bonded me to himself. So often Paul speaks at the beginning of the letters that he's writing to the churches by saying, Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.

Now, when Paul says a servant of Jesus Christ, he doesn't just mean somebody who comes and goes in serving Christ. He means, in the best sense of the word, a slave of Christ.

Somebody bonded to Christ. Somebody completely under the mastery of Christ. Somebody that is now owned by him and has become his property.

And that means that he's obliged in every aspect of his life to set about pleasing this Christ, this master. Paul is not here reluctantly.

Paul is not here in ownership of Christ against his will. This is something he now delights in. He'd have been horrified as he set out on that road to Damascus for anybody to suggest him at that point that he would be a servant of this Jesus that he was committing himself against and to destroy his church.

[15 : 08] And yet, before he reached Damascus, that's what he was. He was on his knees. He was praying. He was in the ownership of this mighty Christ.

In other words, he's telling us that this is one of the great motivations that we have as Christians. We have many things that motivate us in living the Christian life.

But this is one of the great things that motivates us. That we are actually not our own. That we've been bought by the price of Christ's blood. That we are under his ownership.

That we are willingly, not reluctantly, under the ownership and possession of Christ. And you know, the more you think about what it took to bring you to be possessed by Christ, the more you think about the cost of making you a servant of Christ, the more you look into what happened on Calvary when Jesus died, the more you examine the meaning of the cross.

As a Christian, the more you will be moved and motivated to serve him, to be committed to him.

[16 : 30] And to strain yourself towards what he died to achieve for you. The full and final salvation that awaits beyond this world.

So that's what Paul is. He is owned by Christ. And that's a great motivation for him. Now that's why he says back in chapter 1, these very well known words in verse 21 there, where he says there, if you remember he's saying there that he is really being tugged in two directions.

On one hand he's being tugged towards leaving this world and going to be with Christ, which he says is far better. Yet for you Philippians, he's got such a high view of serving Christ that he can even think in his mind of putting that off, if need be, in order that he will serve the church of Christ for some more time.

And he says that's what I'm determined to do. For he says, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. To me to live is Christ. What a statement. What a challenge. The ownership with which Christ owned him had given him this view of life and what life was about.

[18:01] It's all about Christ. It's all about serving Christ. For me to live is Christ. If you ask Paul, what is it, Paul, for you to go to sleep at night? It's Christ. What is it for you to be about your work during the day, Paul?

It's Christ. It's Christ that dominates everything that I seek to do in my daily life. What a challenge that is. But he says, that's what ownership of Christ ultimately means.

What's the greatest motivating factor in your own life? What is it you're really living for? What is it that moves you in your soul to be the person you are, to live the life you're living?

Is it something of this world? Is it material things? Is it people? Because if it's any of these things, they're all going to lead to massive disappointment.

Because they all come to an end. And they're all unreliable. And you can't base your eternity on them. But you can on him.

[19:19] For me to live is Christ. That's what Paul is. Secondly, what Paul is not. Paul is saying, not that I have already obtained this, or I'm already perfect.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. In other words, this perfection, this final likeness to Christ, this thing that Jesus has placed in his heart as a great desire and aim and ambition, it's not yet his.

What he's aiming at is not yet fully possessed by him. Christ has put him on the way to it, but he's still not there. He's still not reached it. He's not yet perfect.

Now you notice what he's saying here, that Jesus took hold of him so that he, Paul, would take hold of this prize ultimately. And the prize, as we've said, is eternal life, or you might say, the life of resurrection, resurrection life with Christ in glory.

That's the prize. That's the thing that awaits. That's what he's really longing to grasp at the end of it all. He's not yet there, but that's what he's looking for. And Jesus, he says, has made me his own so that I would make this my own.

[20:37] He has made me his property so that I would make this my property. He has claimed me for himself so that through that I would come to claim this for myself.

This great prize. This heaven. This glory with Christ. This ultimate perfection. This likeness to Jesus. That's, he says, why Christ has taken hold of me and made me his own so that I would take hold of that.

But he's saying, I have not yet reached that. I am pressing on to make it my own. I do not consider that I have yet made it my own.

That's the prize that Paul has in view. To make it his personal possession in all its fullness in heaven.

And that reminds us of the importance of having a goal or goals in life. And there are many things in which we are involved that require us to have certain goals ahead of us that we aim at.

[21:55] Whatever kind of work we're in, they will inevitably involve having a goal. Or somebody will say to you, that's the aim. That's what you're trying to achieve. That's your goal.

Whether it's in your career, whether it's in your home, in your marriage, with your children, grandchildren, whatever it is, it's important to have goals in life.

It's important to have proper goals, to keep them before you, to actually aim for. Don't go along with the worldly philosophy, mind you, that says, if you really want something, go for it and it will become yours.

That's the way of the world. That's the way of worldly thinking. And it's not necessarily the case that every single goal that we have in life is a good goal to have.

And even some of the goals that we may legitimately have, they're not ultimate goals. They're only for this life. But if it's important to have goals in life, to live life properly, it's far more important to have this goal.

[22 : 58] because this is the one ultimately that really, really matters. To have this objective, it's important to have the goal that Paul had above every other goal.

In fact, you could say that every other goal in life must be fitted under this ultimate goal to be with Christ in glory, to be like Christ, to participate in that resurrection life that belongs to the people of God as his redeemed people.

What's your goal in life? What are you setting out to achieve? What are you putting before yourself every day as to the ambition of your soul?

What is your mind set upon? What's your target? What are you setting out to reach in your life? Like we say, there are many things even for this world that may be legitimate and necessary and proper goals.

It doesn't mean we will actually achieve them, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's bad to have them. There are many that are good. But do you have this goal?

[24 : 10] Is this one set in your soul tonight? Is there anything more important to you than to live in this way?

Than to be a Christian Christ's way? Than to have what Paul is saying here gives him the perseverance in his life that is pressing on towards the prize that Jesus has in store and has promised for him.

What is our goal? Why are we in this world? what is life about? Big questions. Important questions. But here is the Bible's answer. The goal must be God's provision. God's promise of eternal life for us.

Everything else fits around that or under that. And that is what Paul is saying he has as his goal. He has not yet obtained this.

[25 : 17] He is not already perfect. He does not consider that. He has made it his own quite yet. But he knows that it is ahead of him. So thirdly, what is Paul doing?

Well, knowing that, he is saying, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I am pressing on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Christ achieved this prize for him, but he must reach for it. He is not going to earn it. Christ has earned it for him. He does not need to earn it. It has been earned for him.

Christ has obtained this for Paul, but now he must reach toward it in his Christian life. He must progress onwards. He must grow as a Christian.

He must persevere onwards. And there are two things he tells us that actually come into that. But first of all, you notice how single-mindedly he is actually doing this.

[26 : 23] Probably easy to just go over the words without realizing the importance of them, where he says, but one thing I do. Well, it doesn't look all that important, these words, but they are.

One thing I do. You imagine this man and everything that he had to do every day of his life, every single task that was his, all the multitude of things that crammed in upon his time and his attention, all the things he was involved with, with all of these churches, with writing these epistles, with meeting people, with helping Christians wherever he met them, with preaching the gospel, with all the things that pressed in for the apostles' attention, even when he was in prison.

And yet, he is saying, one thing I am doing. He was doing many things, but this, this especially, was the one thing on which he was totally focused, the most important thing, this one thing I do, I press on towards the goal.

Again, the questions, what's most important to myself? What's most important to me as a Christian or as a minister?

What's most important in your own life? life? What is most crucial to you? What one thing would you pick out tonight in your life as the most important thing, the one thing that you're particularly focused on?

[28 : 10] If it's not Christ, then you've got a problem. If it's yourself, then you've got a bigger problem. problem. If it's the world, you've still got a problem.

Because Paul is telling us that this is the one thing that must come ahead of everything else. This goal that Christ has for his people, this likeness to Christ, this following of Christ, this perseverance in the Christian way of life.

life. I am pressing on single-mindedly this one thing. Make a list of the things when you get home or even in your mind right now.

Make a list of things that are really important. Make a list of things that are most important to you. Things that you prioritize. Things that you know are rightly important to you. As you write out your list, put them in order of importance. Just take time over putting them in order of importance. Which one is at the top, number one, all the way down the list.

[29 : 26] Then when you have done that, look at what you have put on the top. What is the one thing that is most important of all?

And that will answer where you are in your life. Where you are in relation to God, where you are in relation to eternity, and where you are as a Christian.

Because Christians also fall by the wayside. Christians sometimes put the thing that ought to be most important, they let it slip down the list.

Christians backslide. Christian hearts grow cold. Christians don't sometimes put Jesus first. ask yourself tonight as a Christian, what is it you put at the top of your list as the one thing that is most important to you?

Here is Paul's answer to the question. This one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straying forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal.

[30 : 35] In other words, the pressing on is the most important thing in his life at that moment, nothing else can be ahead of pressing on towards being with Jesus. But that involves two things.

It involves forgetting the things that are behind and secondly straining forward to the things that lie ahead. Now what does he mean by forgetting what lies behind?

Does it mean that every single thing about our life in the past is no longer of any relevance or of any importance? Nothing to be learned from it, nothing to be gained by it, forget it.

No, that's not what it means. There are many things from our past that we have to bring back to our attention to learn from, to re-evaluate, to think about, to put alongside the things we have presently. And it doesn't mean we just completely forget everything that's been in our past. What this means is that nothing in our past, whatever it may be, should be allowed to hinder us or to get in the way of our moving forwards.

[31 : 51] when you go to Hebrews chapter 12, this again came up at some of the discussions at the discipleship course the other night.

When you go to Hebrews 12, it is worth just looking at it for a moment, just to read through the first few verses there, where Hebrews 12 pictures our Christian life like a race.

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

It says there, let us lay aside every weight. That is the athlete that wants really to compete meaningfully, and if possible to win this race that he or she is involved with.

They must not carry into the race all sorts of extra heavy clothing and footwear, or they will not take part in the race very successfully, they are bound to fail. And the spiritual equivalent of that is, you don't let things from your past become weights.

[33 : 01] You don't carry them in such a way as things that Jesus is not big enough to have taken care of them. For example, we all have regrets.

Things we've done that we shouldn't have done. Regrets over things we've not done, we've left undone. And that we can't go back and do again. We've lost the opportunity.

We've let it go by us. That's just one example of things that can become weights. Things that can come so heavy on our mind that we worry about them.

We let them become a hindrance to our progress onwards. We have to put them off. We have to bring them to Jesus and say, Lord, I know that your grace, and that your person, and that your work is big enough to have taken care of all of these, whatever sins have been involved in them, forgive me and help me to move on.

Otherwise it will weigh you down. Otherwise you won't make the progress that you have to make as a Christian. Forgetting those things that lie behind.

[34 : 13] You see, when the athlete comes to the final lap, they hear the bell. The bell tells them you're entering the final lap of the race. And if you're in a long distance race, there are many laps behind you.

Some of these will have been laps where perhaps you were right at the back of the participants, of the athletes. Now you're maybe moved up, or maybe you were right at the front, and maybe you're now at the back as you enter the final lap.

You mustn't let those things dwell on your mind. What you must keep focused on is the tape at the end of the race, and strain yourself forward with every ounce of your energy until you've come to that final tape and crossed it.

The past laps don't matter to the athlete hearing the bell. It's the final lap that really counts. That's what life is like. Don't let the things that have been in your life be a hindrance to you.

Leave them in the hands of the Lord. Let Jesus take care of them. And that will mean that you've cast off the weight that it would otherwise be, that would hinder you in moving on.

[35 : 28] That's what he is saying. And along with that, he is saying keep your eye on Jesus. In Hebrews 12, still looking at that passage, run the race that's set before you, looking to Jesus.

Also the sin that easily surrounds or clings to us. Some people think that's a specific sin, that everybody has a specific sin that they have a problem with. Could be that. Or it could be sin in general terms, that sin is something that really does cling very closely to us, and it's hard to get rid of, but you must put it off.

You must not let it become a weight. You take your sin every day to Jesus. You ask Jesus to renew your heart, to wash you, to accept you again, to set you on your way.

And then you run your race with perseverance, looking unto Jesus. You don't look behind you. You don't look beside you. You don't look to see who else is in the race.

You look to Jesus. Why? Because he's the author and finisher of our faith, and that means not only is the one who's in charge of our faith, our life, but he's our supreme example of what it means to run a race successfully.

[36 : 47] When you're beginning to fail in your Christian life, when you begin to flag, when you're beginning to know that spiritual tiredness, when your mind gets tired, when your soul gets sluggish, when you know you're slowing down in the race, what do you do?

You look to Jesus. You get your encouragement from him. You get your further inspiration from knowing that your relationship is with one who has himself faced this race that you're on, being tempted with every temptation you're facing, and has overcome them successfully.

You look to him, you get inspired by fellowship with him, by actually coming to him and seeking help from him. Keep your eye upon him as you run your race.

Forgetting the things that are behind, and then he says, the other side of it is, straining forward to what lies ahead. Well, we've mentioned that really, haven't we, as the language that pictures the athlete just coming to the final stage, stretching forward for the tape.

And what it says is this, the more you go on as a Christian, even if you've been a Christian here perhaps 60, 70 years, I don't know, but whoever here is the oldest Christian in terms of their being a Christian, not in terms of their years in the world, but the years they've been a Christian, whoever is the oldest in those terms, will agree with this, that the more they go on, the more they realize that they have to press on further.

[38 : 25] They don't slacken as their life goes on, as they put more and more of their Christian life behind them, having run most of the race. Even when they come to hear the finishing bell, the final lap, when they know the time is close that they're going to leave this world, they don't slacken.

They don't say, well, that's it, I can now relax, I don't have to do much now, I'll just slow down. You still have to read your Bible, pray to God, and hold fellowship with Christ and keep your eye on Him, and put sin behind you, and depend on God's Holy Spirit.

You still have to keep pressing on towards the mark, knowing that God is working within you. It's not less effort as we go on, it's actually in some senses more.

And that's what Paul is doing, he's pressing on towards the goal for this prize, the prize for which God's upward call is put here. God has called him to be united to Christ, and that is an upward call, it's a call where he's taken him and made him his own, as he's put it, with a view to finally going upwards to be with him forever.

But there are no first, second and third places in this race. There's no gold medal, silver medal, bronze medal, because everybody gets a gold medal who finishes the race.

[40 : 21] They all get the same prize of eternal life with Jesus, of that resurrection glory in his likeness. And those who were at the discipleship explored course commented on that.

The DVD showed runners in a race, but it didn't show the end of the race. It didn't show who won or who didn't. And the point of that really was that actually everybody in Christ who persevered to the end is a winner.

And they receive from Jesus what he has promised. What has he promised? Well, read Revelation chapter 3, verse 21.

To him who overcomes, that's the same as saying who perseveres to the end. To him who overcomes, I will grant to sit with me in my throne.

This is Jesus. Even as I overcame, even as I persevere to the end, and I'm set with my father in his throne.

[41 : 30] What a promise. What a thing to aim for. And it's yours. When Christ is yours, and when you are Christ's.

Let's pray. Lord, our God, we thank you for the richness of the life that you give to your people, and for the way that that begins for them even in this world.

We thank you for every way in which we have a foretaste of what the eternal state of your people will be. And Lord, when we know that our experience of fellowship with you in this life is so rewarding, and at times so exhilarating, and so satisfying, it tells us in a little way what heaven will be like for your people.

Help us, Lord, to persevere. Help us to resist all things that seek to pull us back. Help us to resist all of these forces in the world, and from the devil, and all the kinds of influences that would seek to bring our eyes off Jesus on the goal that he has set for us.

And we pray that day by day, by your grace working in us, we too will be enabled to press on, and to work out our salvation, and press towards that mark.

[43 : 01] Hear us now, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.