

Philippians 3:12-4:1

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[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. It is good to be here with you all. So my wife and I have usually got the opportunity to visit here about once a year.

! Usually we come during the summer when we're on vacation. My wife and one of my daughters are away this weekend in upstate New York. But it's good to spend about a year and a half since we've been here.

And it's good to come and see more and more unfamiliar faces and get to meet some of you who I haven't met. I think Andrew mentioned that I knew some of you all before Shoreline was a church. And when you all were having Bible studies in your houses and when none of you were married. So it's neat to see how God has been working among you all in many ways.

So we live about an hour north of here up near Yukon, the main campus, if you know where that is. And I'm a pastor in Vernon now. I was a pastor in New Haven for 10 years before that.

[1:10] But this morning I want to share with you from Philippians chapter 3 beginning at verse 12. And let me just begin by reading this passage, Philippians 3, 12 to 4, 1.

Here are the Apostle Paul's words. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

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

Brothers, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

[2:20] Their end is destruction, their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him to even to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. So one of the things I enjoy doing when I have the opportunity is hiking.

And living here in Connecticut, there are some decent hiking trails, but I would characterize pretty much all of them as going for a walk in the woods. If you want real mountains, you have to go north or very far west.

And so one of the mountains that I have climbed several times in New Hampshire is Mount Mananoc. Mount Mananoc is actually the third most climbed mountain in the world.

There's one in Japan and one in China that top it. But it's pretty accessible to Boston, a major metropolitan city, and the rest of New England.

[3:31] And the top is totally bare. If you've been up there on a clear day, you can see into all six New England states, and you can see the skyline of Boston over 60 miles away.

But the thing about Mount Mananoc is that despite its popularity and its apparent accessibility, there is no easy trail to the top. Any of the trails that lead to the summit include at least one or two sections that are fairly steep where you're scrambling up the side of rocks that are slippery when

wet, and the weather isn't predictable either.

Now, if you're hiking up a mountain with a group of other people, there are at least three dangers that can hinder your progress. First, you can get distracted.

For example, you could sit down by the side of the trail, take out your phone, and start scrolling through Facebook. Well, you're still on the trail that leads to the summit, but you've gotten distracted by something that's completely irrelevant and will not help you achieve your goal.

Or, second, you can take a detour. You know, sometimes these trails feel like they're winding back and forth and back and forth, and you think, there must be a straighter way. What if we just plow through this section of forest up here?

[4:48] Well, we must hit another trail if you keep going uphill. But most of the time, at least for me, when I have tried to take a detour, I have simply ended up lost and needing to turn back around.

Or, third, you can get discouraged. You ever been on a trail and you think, maybe this trail just winds around and around forever. Maybe it will never bring us to the top.

Maybe we should just turn around and call it a day. Well, the Christian life is a lot like climbing a mountain with a group of friends. And in the passage we just read, the Apostle Paul compares the Christian life to an upward call into a difficult journey that leads to a prize of all-surpassing value in the end.

Verses 12 through 14, Paul lays out the mountain we're seeking to climb together, and then in the rest of the passage he warns us against distractions, detours, and discouragement.

So I want to look at this passage. And throughout this passage, the Apostle Paul is sort of like our team captain, leading the way, setting the pace, keeping us focused on the goal that Jesus has called us to.

[6:00] So first, let's look at verses 12 through 14, where Paul lays out the mountain we're seeking to climb, or as he calls it in verse 14, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Now, if you look at 12 through 14, Paul repeats himself. Do you notice he says the same thing in verse 12 as he does in verse 13 and 14. The main verb is the same, press on, I press on.

In both verses, I press on in 12 and in the beginning of 14. Both verses begin with Paul saying where he is not yet. Verse 12 says, Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect.

Verse 13, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But then, both verses continue with saying he presses on, and then they end with the words, Christ Jesus.

Especially if you look in the original Greek, they literally end with those words. Verse 12, you could say, because I have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. And then, verse 14, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

[7:05] So that's how Paul is describing what he is up to as a follower of Christ, and the journey that we're all called into as believers, those who have come to believe and follow Christ.

And if you're not yet a Christian, if you're just sort of here exploring, listening, learning, and you're not yet on that journey, that's what God is inviting you into.

Now, by the time Paul wrote Philippians, he had accomplished a lot in his life as a Christian. He had traveled throughout the known world, preaching and planting new churches.

He was a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus. He had suffered for the gospel of Jesus. Several of his writings would become part of the New Testament. The all-time bestseller, translated into more languages than any other book in the world.

He might not have known that then, but it would be true in the future. And he had already had powerful spiritual experiences. Paul talks about even having had a vision of the third heaven, as well as at other times, God had performed miracles through him.

[8:14] He had prophesied and spoken in tongues by the power of the Holy Spirit. And so, many people would look at Paul and say, whoa, you've made it. You've gotten further in your spiritual life than I probably ever will in my whole life.

Right? You might think Paul's made it to the top. But Paul says, no. Even though I've done all those things, I haven't yet reached my goal.

I'm still on the journey. I'm still pressing on towards knowing Christ and making him known. If you look back in verse 8 through 11, which I think Ethan read for us earlier, Paul says, his great desire is to gain Christ and be found in him.

To know him in the power of his resurrection and in the fellowship of his sufferings. And that's the goal of the Christian life, is to know our crucified and risen Savior more and more deeply. Right? It's like a marriage in that way. Right? The goal is to get to know your spouse more and more deeply and to love that other person that God has brought into your life. So Paul says, I press on to make it my own.

[9:30] I press on toward the goal for the prize of seeing Jesus face to face and being made completely like him. So that's the goal. That's the journey we're on as followers of Jesus.

It's to know Christ, to make him known. That's the mountain God's appointed for us to climb together as brothers and sisters in Christ. But in the rest of this passage, Paul warns us against three common hindrances.

Right? First, verses 15 through 16, Paul warns us against distractions. In other words, he says, let's not be distracted, but rather, let's stay focused. In these verses, Paul speaks as sort of a friend and fellow traveler.

If you notice, he speaks in, says, let us think this way. Let us hold true to what we have attained. Now, there are some other places in Paul's letters where Paul strongly rebukes people for either preaching a completely different message or not living in line with the gospel of Jesus Christ. So in 1 Corinthians, he says, flee from sexual immorality. Later on, he says, flee from idolatry. So there's some things where Paul confronts people sort of directly and head on and says, don't go that route.

[10:45] But here, Paul is saying, if in some sort of relatively minor area, if you think a little differently than I do, God will clear that up over time.

Just live up to what you know already. Right? Keep the main thing the main thing and the rest of the puzzle pieces will gradually fall into place. And if you read further in Philippians, you will notice at the beginning of verse chapter 4, Paul refers to two women in the church who had had a public disagreement.

Paul mentions these women by name and he asks his friend to help these women who have labored side by side with me in the gospel whose names are in the book of life. So Paul doesn't even say what these women were fighting about or quarreling about.

He simply reminds them that what they share in common is more important than whatever the issue was that they were disputing about.

He just says they're co-laborers in the gospel. Their names are in the book of life. We're all on the same team. And just give them a little help and encouragement to act like teammates and not competitors with one another.

[11:57] You know, some things are worth fighting for. Some things are worth drawing a line in the sand sort of like Martin Luther did where he said, here I stand so help me God. But other things aren't.

Not everything falls into that category. And sometimes Christian relationships have been fractured because people have quarreled over minor differences.

But we have failed to do something the scripture clearly tells us which is be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to be angry. Right? That's a pretty direct command that we can all seek to apply. So our goal is to know and become like Christ and where the Bible's clear, it's important to be clear, but Paul also reminds us in a group of people, if we don't all see eye to eye about every little thing, well, that's to be expected.

We're humans after all and we don't all see everything very clearly. And we might even seek to be applying the same biblical principles just in a slightly different way and Paul says, got to work that out over time.

[13:05] Just live up to what you know already. J.C. Ryle put it this way, let Christ and his person be the son of our system and let the main desire of our souls be to live our life of faith in him and daily know him better.

Now that's the first point. Let's not be distracted, but rather, let's stay focused. Second, in verses 17 through 19, Paul gives a more pointed warning. He says, don't take a detour, but stay on the path of the cross.

If verses 15 and 16 are a friendly encouragement, verses 17 through 19 are a sober warning. Verse 18, Paul says, many of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

You see, Paul says that knowing Christ is not only about experiencing the power of his resurrection, it's also sharing in his sufferings, walking along a hard road that we would not choose for ourselves. You know, Jesus did not say, follow your heart, be true to yourself, and you do you. Jesus said, if anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[14:37] And you see, the problem with the people Paul was warning against in verses 18 and 19 is that they are not willing to walk in that way. They're not willing to walk in the way of the cross.

Now, the people who Paul calls enemies of the cross of Christ, they weren't necessarily persecuting Christians. I guess they possibly could have been, but some of them might have even claimed to be Christians.

but they weren't willing to take up their cross and follow Christ. Paul says, their God is their belly. In other words, they order their life around their bodily appetites and their own desire for comfort and pleasure.

They glory in their shame. In other words, they not only persist in attitudes and actions that dishonor God, they revel and glory in those very things. Paul says, their minds are set on earthly things. They've taken a detour from the hard way of the cross in order to follow a seemingly easier path. And yet, Paul says, don't follow that seemingly easier path.

[15:43] Because these people are unwilling to die to themselves and to their sin, they will never truly live in the power of Christ. They will never experience the life-giving and transforming power of Christ.

They will never enter in to the new heavens and the new earth. And Paul weeps as he gives this warning. And you know, we too should weep as we, when we look at the world around us and see people living this way.

But here's the warning for us. Paul's not really speaking, Paul's writing this to professing Christian believers. He's not just giving the warning to people outside the church.

He's warning us. beware of falling into earthly-minded patterns. Let's just think, what might we need to take to heart from Paul's warning here?

I think the main thing is we need to embrace the way of the cross and not look for an easier version of Christianity. Jesus Christ called his disciples to a difficult and counter-cultural way of life.

[16:50] Just consider Jesus' instructions in his most famous set of teachings, the Sermon on the Mount. Here's just a few things Jesus says in that sermon. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

In other words, tell the truth and keep your word even if it hurts. Or love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. That doesn't come naturally to any humans to seek the good of people who seem to be dead set against us.

Or seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness rather than our own desires and comforts. Or take the log out of your own eye first so that then you can help to remove the speck from your brother or sister's eye.

None of these things are easy. None of these things come naturally to us fallen human beings. But following Jesus in a fallen world is never going to be easy.

And you know, let me speak to those of you who are parents for a minute. Parents, I think we need to be honest about this with our children. I think there are sort of two different traps that Christian parents can fall into that relate to this passage.

[18:07] Right? One trap that Christian parents can fall into might be described as legalism. In other words, adding rules to the Bible, putting burdens on our kids that God never intended them to bear and being excessively restrictive.

Right? That's one danger that Christian parents can sometimes fall into. But the opposite danger we might describe as worldliness or earthly mindedness.

In other words, thinking that being a Christian should never get in the way of your success. Right? So what do you do?

Many of you have sort of relatively younger kids right now, but what do you do if your kid signs up for baseball this spring and the coach says, practices every Sunday 10 a.m. to noon? I've met a fair number of professing Christian families who think that the obvious answer is to skip church for two or three months.

[19:13] But if you make that choice, what you're saying to your kids is sports and kids' activities are sacred and gathering for worship with other believers is optional.

Right? Now we could have a lot of conversations about how do you communicate this to the coach? Right? The coach is not. The coach who schedules practice on Sunday at 10 a.m. probably has nothing against Christians.

He probably can't imagine that anyone actually goes to a church that only meets at one time of the week. Right? So we could have a lot of conversations.

How do you communicate this? You know, do you make occasional exceptions for weekends away, etc.? A lot of questions we can talk about. But here's the point. As parents, are we teaching our children that part of being a Christian is we are called to be different and sometimes that will involve making sacrifices.

Right? And that's not something that we should apologize to our kids for, but it's also something we need to ask ourselves, am I living a life that my kids see I'm willing to make sacrifices of things that I wish I could do, but I'm going to do what's best for our family.

[20:35] Or I'm going to make sacrifices myself and not just tell you that you need to make sacrifices. You see, here's the thing.

Jesus is not merely a means to a prosperous, prestigious, popular life. The Apostle Paul said, it has been granted to you, this is the end of chapter 1 in Philippians, it has been granted to you for the sake of Christ that you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake.

Paul says it's a gift to suffer and sacrifice for Jesus. When Jesus calls us to do hard things, to walk a hard road with him, to choose a path that we would not choose to walk if we didn't know him, he offers us the sweetest fellowship along the way.

You know, some of the times in my own life looking back when I have felt the Lord's presence most strongly and when I have sensed his love for me most deeply were some of those very seasons. where I was walking a hard road. How do we stay on this path? Verse 17, Paul reminds us, he says, brothers and sisters, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

[21:50] What's the best way to learn how to hike a mountain? Is it to bring a phone with a good GPS and a map? I think it's even better to have someone with you who's done it before.

Who knows where the trail goes and you can trust them because they've gone up this path several times before and they know the things that a map can't show you.

right? And I think that's the best way to learn how to endure hardship as a Christian is to have look for brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone through hard times with patience and courage and grace and endurance and keep your eyes on people like that and learn everything you can from them even if you're not in a particularly hard time of your life right now but learn everything you can from them now so that when the time comes that that you you will benefit from that and make it your aim to set an example for others right?

To bring others along with you on this journey to be able to say with Paul follow my example as I follow the example of Christ. All right so we've seen Paul's encouragement don't be distracted rather stay focused his warning don't take a detour but stay on the path of the cross and finally verses 20, 21 and the first verse of chapter 4 don't be discouraged but instead persevere.

Paul says our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a savior the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.

[23:40] Paul uses this metaphor of citizenship I think partly because citizens of Philippi had great privileges and great responsibilities.

Philippi was a Roman colony so what that meant was if you were a citizen of Philippi you had all the rights and privileges of citizens of the capital city of the empire of Rome and so citizens of Philippi

could appeal to Caesar for help if there was a band of marauding raiders who came and attacked their city they could immediately appeal to Caesar for help and he would send his armies to come and rescue them and drive away the invaders and they also had a great responsibility as citizens of Philippi as a Roman colony they sort of extended Roman rule Roman language Roman culture to their city and their region and Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi to remind them that they have an even greater responsibility and privilege our citizenship he says is in heaven we have a savior the Lord Jesus Christ we can call on him in prayer when we need help and he will send to save us and we also have a great responsibility to represent him in this part of the world where he's put us to represent his kingdom among the nations of the world you know many things in this world are uncertain and easily shaken but Paul says

Christians have a rock solid hope because one day in the future King Jesus will come and he will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious resurrected body he will rescue us finally and forever from all our enemies and we'll see him face to face and we'll reign with him on earth and that's our hope let me encourage you if you're discouraged or even if you're despairing remember that the best is always yet to come following Jesus is hard there's no smooth and easy trail to heaven the only way onward and upward is to take up our cross and follow Jesus and sometimes the path that we must tread feels like clambering up a wet rock face or wading through a muddy swamp but Paul says you have a promise from your faithful savior who has blazed this trail with his own blood you have a promise that he will one day transform your aching weary weak and sinful body and to make it glorious and strong and solid and everlasting and holy forever and that promise will not change no matter how bad you feel no matter how bleak the future seems no matter how lonely you may be he will come and rescue you

Paul says he who began a good work in and among you will carry it on until the day that Christ Jesus returns and on that day you will reach the summit when you will see him face to face you will see the one who has blazed the trail through his own death and resurrection the one who has taken hold of you so that you can take hold of him and enjoy him forever Martin Luther put it this way this life therefore is not righteousness but growth in righteousness not health but healing not being but becoming not rest but exercise we are not yet what we shall be but we are growing toward it the process is not yet finished but it is going on this is not the end but it is the road all does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified that's the Christian hope that overcomes discouragement and despair and it's the strongest reason of all why we can press on as Paul encourages us to toward the goal of knowing Christ and becoming like him let's pray father God we thank you for your words in the scripture we thank you for preserving them for us for over 2,000 years giving them to us in our language that we can read and hear and understand them and we pray

Lord that these words that Paul wrote from confinement probably in Rome itself so long ago would encourage us and help us to press on individually I pray for Shoreline that you would enable this church to press on together to know Christ to make him known to become more like him not to be distracted but rather to stay focused not to seek an easier road but to embrace the hard way of the cross and not to be discouraged but to find hope in that promise that you are with us from the beginning to the end pray this in Jesus name Amen