

Press On in Christ

Philippians 3:7-14
SS Lesson for 02/03/2019

Devotional Scripture: Phil 2:12-18

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It should not be pride in our faith or knowledge (1 Cor. 8:13)

It should be living according to the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13)

It should be to follow Jesus (Luke 5:27-28)

It should be to be a disciple of God (Luke 14:33)

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Mature faith is growing and acting more like Jesus into holiness (2 Cor 7:1)

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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

An old joke begins with the scene of a man driving his family to a certain destination, but they became lost. After a while, the wife asked the husband, “Do you know where you are going?” Choosing his words carefully, the husband paused a few seconds before replying, “No, I don’t. But we’re making excellent time!” If we ever expect to arrive at our destination, we have to know where we are going. The route may need some discovery and modification. But if we know where we are going, we can adjust to get there. This obvious truth is part of the message of today’s text. When we know where God has us going, we can be confident that in every circumstance we are still moving toward that blessed destination.

Many circumstances had come together to create disunity in the Philippian church. We can surmise that personal differences and rivalries played a role. Certainly the selfishness to which all people are vulnerable was the fertile ground in which the problem grew. But another factor was the influence of those who advocated that Jewish people have a place of preeminence in the church. As in other churches founded by Paul, the Philippian church was troubled by those whom we identify as Judaizers. These insisted that to belong to God’s people, believers in Jesus must toe the line with regard to the Law of Moses, especially the requirement for circumcision (Philippians 3:2, 3). Paul understood, however, that Christ had brought the fulfillment of the Law of Moses. This meant that God accepted non-Jews as they were. Paul understood that the division between Jew and Gentile had been taken away, making one body of anyone who accepted Christ (Acts 2:37–39; 15:1–31; Ephesians 2:11–22; Colossians 3:11). What faith produces is an identity marker of the people of God in Christ, not the keeping of the Law of Moses. If Christ came as the lowly servant of all (last week’s lesson), then no follower of his can look upon another Christian as a second-class citizen of the kingdom of God. In Christ, all Christians are first-class citizens of that kingdom. Christ must be the standard that the church pursues in unity, not score-keeping regarding adherence to a set of laws. In the context preceding our text, Paul had used himself as an example of this contrast. Others may make the claim to be the true, first-class people of God because of their observance of the Law of Moses, but Paul could make a greater claim. He was in all respects highly observant of all the laws that marked Israel as a distinctive people (Philippians 3:4–6). As our text begins, Paul declares what faith in Christ demands that he say regarding his attainments as a faithful observer of the law.

Key Verse: Philippians 3:13-14

13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Paul gave some interesting autobiographical facts in these verses. On the surface it appears he was boasting. However, closer examination reveals that this was precisely what he tried to avoid and warn against. To be sure, there was a time when the apostle had confidence in the flesh. But this was no longer true. To stress that he used to have great boldness and pride in his own achievements, Paul reviewed his past for the Philippians. After this he told about his crisis conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

3:4-6. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that Paul did not place any **confidence in the flesh**. He had gained victory over that temptation of the devil. His presentation in these verses was intended to review for the Philippians the things in which he could have placed confidence if he had wanted to. In fact the list included things in which he did place great value and trust before he met Christ. His intention was to show that in the flesh he had more in which he could have boasted than did any of the Judaizers. The **anyone else**

(v. 4) referred to all who place confidence in the flesh. Paul wrote as though he were challenging the Judaizers to a showdown. His preliminary conclusion before he even got specific was that no matter what advantage was brought forth by his opponents, his advantages exceeded theirs (cf. Gal. 1:14). Seven advantages listed in Philippians 3:5-6 demonstrate what Paul used to have in the flesh but what he later counted as loss for Christ. Two kinds of advantages are enumerated. First are those things which the apostle had by birth, apart from his choice. Four of these are listed—circumcision, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, and a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents. Next he named those privileges which he voluntarily chose—being a Pharisee, being a persecutor of the church, and having a flawless external record of **legalistic righteousness**. Circumcision was named first probably because it was a big issue with the Judaizers. Paul's specific time, **the eighth day**, stressed that he was not a proselyte or an Ishmaelite but a pure-blooded Jew. Proselytes were circumcised later in life and Ishmaelites after age 13 (cf. Gen. 17:25-26). Paul was **of the people of Israel**, which describes his heritage. His parents were both true Jews, unlike some of the Judaizers. He could trace his family lineage all the way back to Abraham. He was a true member of the covenant people (cf. 2 Cor. 11:22). He was also a Benjamite, from which tribe came Israel's first king (1 Sam. 9:1-2). This tribe had a special place of honor and was viewed with great esteem. Even after the kingdom was disrupted the tribe of Benjamin remained loyal to the house of David. Hebrew was Paul's native tongue. Unlike some of the Israelites, he did not adopt Greek customs. He knew thoroughly both the language and customs of the people of God. He was a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents. In regard to the Law, Paul was a **Pharisee**, a member of the strictest sect among his people. In addition to the Law of Moses the Pharisees added their own regulations which in time were interpreted as equal to the Law. What greater **zeal** for the Jewish religion could anyone boast of than that he persecuted **the church**? Paul did this relentlessly before his conversion to Christ (Acts 9:1-2). No Judaizer could match such zeal. In "legalistic righteousness" Paul also excelled. In fact in his own eyes he was **faultless** (*amemptos*; the same word is used in Phil. 2:15 where it is rendered "blameless").

3:7-9. Any of those who troubled the saints at Philippi would have loved to have been able to list to his credit those things Paul did. On the human side these were reasons to have religious self-confidence. But all those things enumerated in verses 5-6 the apostle considered **loss for the sake of Christ** (v. 7). **Consider** means to "think through or reflect on." After reflection he considered them loss. This he did at a point in time in the past and that decision was still in effect when he wrote, as connoted by the use of the Greek perfect tense. Doubtless Paul considered his life-transforming conversion on the Damascus Road as the time when he switched from confidence in the flesh to confidence in Christ alone. It would be hard to find a more forceful refutation of human effort to please God than what Paul presented here (v. 8). Four Greek particles (*alla menoun ge kai*) are translated **what is more** and introduce the strong statements of verse 8. Paul considered as **loss** not only the things already listed (vv. 5-6), but **everything** (v. 8). In exchange for confidence in the flesh Paul gained the **surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus** personally. Christ was now his **Lord**. His former "gains" (*kerdē*, v. 7) he considered "rubbish" (which can mean food scraps or dung) so that he might **gain** (*kerdēsō*) **Christ**. Nothing else really mattered to him any longer. Having Christ as his Savior and Lord so far surpassed anything he had in Judaism. Those who "gain Christ" (v. 8) are those **found in Him** (v. 9). Christ is in the believer and the believer is in Christ. Paul wanted his life to demonstrate these truths. Being in Christ, he was not clinging to any **righteousness** of his own doing associated with Law-keeping. Such a righteousness is viewed by God as no righteousness at all but rather as "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). The righteousness which saves and in which Paul rested is **through** (*dia*) **faith in Christ**. This is the only kind which **comes from God and is by** (*epi*) **faith**. When a believing sinner responds in faith to the Spirit's work in his heart, he is clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Rom. 3:24-26). In this position he is "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6, *κτν*). Thus robed, the believing sinner stands complete in Christ.

3:10-11. These verses contain an open and honest confession to the Philippians. Paul already knew Christ as his Savior. But he wanted to know Him more intimately as his Lord. **To know** (v. 10) means "to know by experience" (*gnōnai*). The noun (*gnōseōs*) is used in verse 8. The "surpassing greatness of knowing Christ" is now elaborated in verses 10-11. This is how Paul wanted to know Him. More of what he desired in his Christian life follows. To experience **the power of His resurrection** was also the apostle's goal. The power which brought Christ forth from the dead now operates in believers' lives since they have been "raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1). "Power" (*dynamis*, also used in Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16) means ability to overcome resistance. By setting forth his own goals and ambitions Paul gave the Philippians an example to follow. His example was, of course, in stark contrast to the Judaizers whose example they were not to follow. Paul also longed to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and in so doing to become **like Him in His death** (Phil. 3:10). These sufferings were not Christ's substitutionary sufferings on the cross. Paul knew that those could not be shared. But he did desire to participate with Christ, since he was one of

His, in suffering for the sake of righteousness (cf. 1:29). God had used Ananias to tell Paul that this is precisely what he would do as a servant of Christ (Acts 9:16). The apostle did indeed suffer for Christ because he represented Him so openly and truly (cf. Rom. 8:36; 2 Cor. 4:10). The words “becoming like Him” translate *symmorphizomenos*, which means “being conformed inwardly in one’s experience to something” (cf. Phil. 3:21), in this case, to Christ’s death. As Christ died *for* sin, so a believer has died *to* sin (Rom. 6:2, 6-7; Col. 3:3). He should exhibit that cutting off from his former sinful way by daily being set apart from sin (Rom. 6:1-4, 11-14) and living a new life by means of Christ’s resurrection power (Rom. 6:4). “Resurrection” (Phil. 3:11) is the translation of *exanastasin*, a Greek word used nowhere else in the New Testament. It means a partial resurrection out from among other corpses, literally an “out-resurrection.” But why did Paul say he wanted **somehow, to attain to the (out-) resurrection from the dead?** Did he doubt he would be raised from the dead? Hardly. Perhaps he was using this word to refer to the Rapture, thus expressing the hope that the Lord would return during his lifetime.

3:12-14. Though Paul was a spiritual giant in the eyes of the Philippian saints, he wanted them to know that he had not yet attained the goals stated in verse 10. He was still actively pressing on toward them. He had by no means reached the final stage of his sanctification. Paul’s salvation experience had taken place about 30 years before he wrote to the Philippians. He had won many spiritual battles in that time. He had grown much in those years, but he candidly confessed he had not **obtained all this**, nor was he yet **made perfect** (v. 12). He still had more spiritual heights to climb. This testimony of the apostle reminded the saints at Philippi—and it serves to remind believers today—that there must never be a stalemate in their spiritual growth or a plateau beyond which they cannot climb. Paul pursued Christlikeness with the enthusiasm and persistence of a runner in the Greek games. Unlike the Judaizers, whose influence was prevalent among the Philippians, the apostle did not claim to have attained spiritual maturity. He was still pressing on, pursuing **that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him**. Nor had he yet **taken hold of it**, that is, he had not yet attained perfection or ultimate conformity to Christ. But he was determined that he would forget the past and, like a runner, press on toward the goal. Paul refused to be controlled or absorbed by his past heritage (vv. 5-7) or his attainments (v. 8). Vigorously and with concentration Paul sought **to win the prize** to which God had **called him heavenward** (v. 14). Again the Greek games must have been on his mind as he wrote of the prize. The winner in those games was called to the place where the judge sat in order to receive his prize. Paul may have referred to ultimate salvation in God’s presence, or to receiving rewards at “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Press on by Counting the Cost (Phil 3:7-9)

7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.

8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

Determine what is important (7-8)

It should not be possessions (Luke 18:22)

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

It should not be pride in our faith or knowledge (1 Cor. 8:13)

Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

It should be living according to the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13)

For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live,

It should be to follow Jesus (Luke 5:27-28)

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, [28] and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

It should be to be a disciple of God (Luke 14:33)

In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

Determine source of righteousness (9)

The source of righteousness is Jesus and Jesus only (Isaiah 45:24)

They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength.' "All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.

Jesus is more than righteousness, He is also our redeemer and source of holiness (1 Cor. 1:30)

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Righteousness is gained through belief (Romans 10:4)

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Jesus provided righteousness through reconciliation (Col. 1:21-22)

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. [22] But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation

True Righteousness (From the Bible Expositor and Illuminator)

As a Christian, Paul learned that the kind of righteousness that comes from keeping the law is not true righteousness at all. In Christ, however, Paul possessed true righteousness, the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ. This genuine righteousness is a gift of God. When a person receives Christ as his Saviour, God also gives him the righteousness of Christ.

Press on by Setting the Goals (Phil 3:10-12)

10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,

11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.

Goal of resurrection (10-11)

Because being resurrected means we will be with God (Psalm 49:15)

But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself.

Because all will be resurrected, some to heaven others to hell (John 5:28-29)

"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice [29] and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

Because resurrection of the saints is God's will (John 6:40)

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Because resurrection is done by the power of God (1 Cor. 6:14)

By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.

Because resurrection is a key element of our faith (2 Cor. 4:13-14)

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, [14] because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.

Because through spiritual resurrection we can live a new life (Romans 6:4)

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Seeking to obtain what God has purposed for us (12)

Seeking God's purposes because they always works in conformity with His will (Eph 1:11-12)

11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

Seeking God's purposes because they are fulfilled in His people (Ps 57:2)

2 I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills [his purpose] for me.

Seeking God's purposes because they are eternal (Isa 46:10)

10 I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

Seeking God's purposes because they work for the good of those who love Him (Rom 8:28)

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Seeking God's purposes because they work in His people for His good purpose (Phil 2:13)

13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Seeking God's purposes because they are unchanging (Heb 6:17)

17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

Press on by Pressing Forward (Phil 3:13-14)

13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,

14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Pressing forward by forgetting the past (13-14)

Forget the past because we are a new creation and the old should be gone (2 Cor 5:17)

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Forget the past because anyone who looks back is not fit for the service of God (Luke 9:62)

62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Forget the past because life is nothing if we don't complete the task God has assigned us (Acts 20:24)

24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Forget the past, but don't forsake the zeal for God we had in the beginning (Rev 2:4)

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

Forget the past because the future has a surpassing glory (2 Cor 3:10-11)

10 For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. 11 And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Pressing forward by seeking a mature faith (14)

Mature faith starts by learning about godly doctrines (Heb 6:1)

6 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,

Mature faith is being built up in unity, knowledge of God, and attaining the full measure of the fullness of Jesus (Eph 4:11-13)

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Mature faith is progressing in the practice of using God's Word (Heb 5:14)

14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Mature faith is growing and acting more like Jesus into holiness (2 Cor 7:1)

7 Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Mature faith is being patient and waiting on God and His perfect purposes to work in our life (James 1:4)

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Mature faith is growing in the Divine grace and gifts that God provides (2 Peter 1:3-8)

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pressing forward by committing to Growth (14)

Committing to growth in our salvation (Phil 2:12)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,

Committing to throw off hindrances (Heb 12:1-2)

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Committing to let our light shine (Proverbs 4:18)

The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

Committing to add to our biblical learning (Proverbs 9:9)

Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.

Committing to the work of the saints (Ephes. 4:16)

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Committing to follow the instructions of God (1 Thes. 4:1)

Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

My wife and I have five grown daughters. Years ago when our girls were young, we would load them all in the car each summer and set out from Dallas to visit our families in Washington State. After two hours on the road we would come to Wichita Falls, Texas. It was absolutely predictable. One of our girls was virtually certain to ask, "Daddy, are we at Grandma and Grandpa's yet?" There was no way to tell them that we had covered only a little more than two hours and a hundred miles, and that we had three more days and over two thousand miles yet to go. We were on our way, but we had not yet arrived.

This is what Paul is trying to convey to the Philippians about his spiritual journey and theirs. When Paul was an unconverted Jew, he actually thought he had arrived spiritually.

If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more: 5 I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee. 6 In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless (Philippians 3:4b-6).

Who could attain any more than this? Paul's encounter with the risen Christ opened his eyes to the fact that he had not arrived at all. He was not furthering the cause of God; he was opposing it. He had not arrived; he was not even on the right path. He was going in the wrong direction!

Having come to faith in Christ for his salvation, Paul knew that he was on the right path and going in the right direction. But he also realized that he had not yet arrived, and that there was a difficult course ahead, which required perseverance and discipline.

23 I do all these things because of the gospel, so that I can be a participant in it. 24 Do you not know that all the runners in a stadium compete, but only one receives the prize? So run to win. 25 Each competitor must exercise self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. 26 So I do not run uncertainly or box like one who hits only air. 27 Instead I subdue my body and make it my slave, so that after preaching to others I myself will not be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:23-27; see also Hebrews 12:1-13).

This is not to say that Paul was pursuing sanctification by his own strength, but that in the strength God provided he was pressing on in his walk, living out the life of Christ, and stretching forward to the upward call (Philippians 3:14).

There have always been those who have sought to portray a very different image of themselves than that which Paul conveys here. They want us to believe that they have already arrived spiritually. If they could, they would

have us believe that they live above the struggles, temptations, and trials of this life. They are not open and transparent about their struggles and failures in their Christian life. They would be very reluctant to admit their failings, and some would deny that they sin any longer. If we were to believe such folks, then we would be very inclined to follow them because they are so much more spiritual than we are.

Paul does call upon his readers to “follow his example,” but he does not do so claiming to have already arrived. Paul calls upon us to “follow his example” in striving toward the goal of maturity in Christ. Paul is not a super spiritual man who has arrived, who is beckoning to us to follow the trail he has already blazed; Paul is on the pathway, pressing onward toward maturity, urging us to join with him in his pursuit of maturity in Christ.

Paul’s words were intended to correct an error known as “perfectionism.” In its simplest form, perfectionism is the belief that one can arrive at perfection in this life. Believe it or not there are those who actually believe that one can reach sinless perfection in this life. I’ve never really known a person who claimed to have arrived in this sense, but I have known a number of people who think that they have arrived in the sense that they are a whole lot further down the path of perfection than others. Comparatively speaking, they think that they are a great deal more spiritual than others. I must say that they seem to think they are much more spiritual than others think they are, others who know them well.

Paul is absolutely emphatic about the fact that he has not yet arrived, so emphatic that he repeats himself twice: **“I have not yet arrived”** (see verses 10-11, 14, 16). By inference, he does so more often than this. Paul has been gloriously saved (3:4-9), and his salvation experience has commenced the process of his sanctification. But that process, commenced at his conversion, is not complete.

If the Apostle Paul has not arrived spiritually, then certainly no one else has either. The consequence of this fact is that no one is free to sit back, resting upon their laurels, as though all they must do is to wait for our Lord’s return. The Christian is not to be content with the status quo, but must press on toward the goal that has been set before him. And that is precisely what Paul does, while challenging us to follow his example. The goal is two-fold; it is both general and specific. The general goal toward which every Christian is to strive is that of the **“upward call”**—either the day of our death, or the day when our Lord returns for His saints, to snatch them up from this world to be with Him forever. In one sense, this is an event in the future, which draws nearer by the passing of time. In another sense, it is a future event which we are to pursue, and to seek to hasten.

Let me attempt to illustrate. Suppose that a young man has become engaged to a lovely young woman, whom he has not seen for several months because she has been in Europe thousands of miles away. He receives word that she is returning and that he can meet her plane at a certain place and time. He could merely wait for her at home, until she arrives from the airport. But you and I know that he will not do so. He will go to the airport to meet her there. And when she gets off her plane and comes into the gate area, he will immediately rush to her when she comes into sight, so that he can be with her all the sooner. That is the way we should be with respect to our upward call. We should be pressing toward our Lord, as He draws nearer to us.

There is a second goal toward which we should be striving. The first goal was a general one; the second goal is more specific. We should be striving toward that particular purpose for which Christ called us. We were saved **“unto good works”** (Ephesians 2:10), and we know that God has a particular plan for each one of us, just as He had for Paul (see Acts 9:15-16; 26:15-18). We have each been saved for a particular purpose, for a particular role in the body of Christ, and for a unique ministry to that body (see 1 Corinthians 12). Paul expressed his eagerness to fulfill his calling, and we should do likewise.

Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

So I do not run uncertainly or box like one who hits only air (1 Corinthians 9:26).

5 You, however, be self-controlled in all things, endure hardship, do an evangelist’s work, **fulfill your ministry**. 6 For I am already being poured out as an offering and the time for me to depart is at hand. 7 I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith! 8 Finally the crown of righteousness is reserved for me. The Lord, the righteous Judge, will award it to me in that day—and not to me only, but also to all who have set their affection on his appearing (2 Timothy 4:5-8, emphasis mine).

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, we must get rid of every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race set out for us, 2 keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set out for him he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and *has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne* of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

If we are going to press on toward the goal before us, then we cannot keep looking behind. That is why Paul tells us that we must be “**forgetting the things behind and reaching out for the things ahead**” (verse 13). Just what are the “things behind us” that we are to forget? I would be inclined to think of these “things to forget” in two categories: (1) things from our non-Christian past; and, (2) things from our past as believers.

First, let’s consider the things of our pre-Christian past. When Paul came to faith in Jesus Christ, he realized that all of the things in which he had boasted were really “**dung**.” He also realized that in persecuting the saints he had been opposing his Lord. Paul would certainly not wish to cling to the past in terms of these “accomplishments,” because they were not accomplishments at all, spiritually speaking. But he also needed to accept the fact that when he came to faith in Christ, he became “**a new creation**” (2 Corinthians 5:17), and that the guilt of his past had been washed away by the blood of Christ. There was no great profit to his agonizing over his past. Paul was deeply committed to the doctrine of sovereignty, and thus he must trust that God had used even his wicked deeds against the saints for their good, and for God’s glory (Romans 8:28).

Second, let’s consider the things of our Christian past. If we are to fix our eyes on what lies ahead, then we cannot be obsessed with anything in our past, even our past as believers. Let me suggest some of the things in this category that we should “forget.”

We should forget the sins and failures of our past. We must first have dealt with these issues, for Paul is surely not giving us an excuse for failing to deal with matters that require some kind of action on our part. Debts should be paid. Confession should be made and reconciliation sought. Lessons should be learned, and changes should be made. But once we have dealt with our failures, we should leave them and move on. Having dealt with the past, we should not dwell on the past.

We should forgive and forget the sins that others have committed against us. We need to learn to forgive those who have sinned against us, and to leave their offenses behind us (Matthew 5:43-48; 18:21-35; Luke 11:14; Ephesians 4:32). Bitterness is the lingering hostility that results when sins are not forgiven and forgotten, and thus it is forbidden (Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:19).

We should forget our apparent successes in the past. How easy it is to rest on our laurels and to dwell upon past successes. We cannot look back if we are going to press on. We do not win races by looking backward, but by focusing on the finish line. I should also caution that those things we may consider to be successes may prove to be something else when we stand before Him who knows all:

2 Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful. 3 So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not acquitted because of this. The one who judges me is the Lord. 5 So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God (1 Corinthians 4:2-5).

I should hasten to add that there are many things that we should remember, but these reminders are to serve as incentives for us to press on. We see this in Peter’s second epistle:

10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, **make every effort** to be sure of your calling and election. For by doing this you will never stumble into sin. 11 For thus **an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be richly provided for you.** 12 Therefore, **I intend to remind you constantly** of these things even though you know them and are well established in the truth that you now have. 13 Indeed, as long as I am in this tabernacle, **I consider it right to stir you up by way of a reminder,** 14 since I know that my tabernacle will soon be removed, because our Lord Jesus Christ revealed this to me. 15 Indeed, I will also make every effort that, after my departure, you have a testimony of these things (2 Peter 1:10-15, emphasis mine; see also Romans 15:15; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Timothy 1:6; 4:11-14; Titus 3:1; 2 Peter 3:1ff.).

The things we are to remember are those things that will cause us to set our eyes on Jesus and to press on to the goal of our upward call.

The goal that Paul pursues is the “**upward call**.” This certainly seems to be a reference to the rapture of the saints, when our Lord comes to take His saints home (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Therefore our race is not finished until we have either died or have been raptured into heaven. No one is permitted to slack off until the finish line, until their race is won. Why is it, then, that there are some professing saints who look back to their salvation, years earlier, but who have been “on vacation” ever since? Over and over in this epistle, Paul has his eyes on the finish line, which is still ahead and toward which we must strive (see 1:6, 10, 21; 2:9-11, 16; 3:11, 20).

Those who are truly mature, Paul writes, will concur with what he says. In other words, they will agree that salvation is just the “starting gun,” just the beginning of the race that we are all to run, and that the goal will not be reached until after our death or our upward calling. They will agree that no Christian “arrives” in this life, but keeps pressing on toward the goal. Those who think otherwise, God will correct.

Verse 15 is not an excuse for looking the other way when our brother or sister is overtaken in a fault (see Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-2). We are **“our brother’s keeper.”** We are instructed to admonish, rebuke, and correct (see 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Timothy 3:14-17). In Philippians 4:1-3, Paul will seek to bring about the reconciliation of two disputing women—Euodia and Syntyche. Paul is speaking about a particular point of view here, as I understand him. He is speaking to those who would suppose that they can arrive or have already done so. We need not wear ourselves out trying to convince them that they are still struggling with sin. God will make that all too plain to them in time.

I am reminded of the story of a man who was speaking at a seminary years ago. This man believed he had gained complete victory over sin in his life. As he and another saint were walking along, a young lad began to bother the old gentleman. Finally, in irritation, the older man pushed the young lad away, and the boy (as I remember the story) stumbled and fell. The older man was ashamed and embarrassed because of his sinful conduct. He turned to the fellow with him and said, “I never knew I had that in me.” The other gentleman replied, “Oh, I knew it all the time.” There are times when we need to leave the correction of some matters to God.

Paul ends this paragraph with a word of exhortation: **“Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained”** (verse 16). Paul has been encouraging us as saints to join him in pressing on in our faith and walk. We have yet to finish the race, but we must fix our eyes on the goal and strive in His strength to reach that for which we were called. The one thing we must never even consider is turning back. There is no level of attainment that is high enough—we must press on, forgetting the past. There is no level of attainment so high that we are allowed to slack off, performing beneath that level which has already been attained. Put as briefly and pointedly as possible, **THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR BACKSLIDING.**

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/11-paul-s-perspective-perfectionism-phil-312-21>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today’s text certainly prompted the Philippian Christians to reassess the direction of their lives. Remembering Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, looking forward to resurrection and life with him at his return—these meant that the readers’ present lives had to be transformed into greater likeness to Christ. There was no place for the division that had begun to afflict this congregation (compare Philippians 4:2). There was only room for self-giving service, empowered by the risen Lord. We are confronted with the same need for self-assessment. What is our direction? Are we caught up in our own achievement or dragged down by our failures? Are we wrapped up in ourselves? We can begin a self-assessment by considering how Paul evaluated his own losses and gains. As a Christian, he had a difficult, miserable life (again, 2 Corinthians 11:22–33). But Christ showed him that real worth is found in trusting God’s provision and giving oneself for others as Christ gave himself for us. The end result will be worth it: resurrection and eternity with Christ. Christ calls us to continue the race, to renew our reassessment of profit and loss, to remember the one who laid hold of us so that we can lay hold of that to which he called us. How is Christ calling you to be more like him?

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Paul’s Past Life - The apostle Paul had every reason to be proud of his past religious accomplishments, but he put them all aside. He realized all his prior activities he could have boasted about amounted to an attempt to please God in the flesh, and empty pride.

Paul’s Present Life - Paul counted his previous deeds as useless in comparison to truly understanding Christ. If he had continued with his past life and never become a Christian, he would not be suffering as a criminal. In spite of his adverse circumstances, Paul concluded that attempting to be righteous by his own merit and keeping the law were not what God wanted. Now Paul focused on the resurrected Christ. He wanted to experience the same power that raised Christ from the dead surging through him so he could imitate Christ’s attitude and actions while on earth. But Paul realized this also meant sharing in Christ’s sufferings. Paul knew martyrdom probably awaited him as he sat in prison.

Paul Pressed Forward - Paul viewed death as the final stepping stone to the Father. He did not wish to die, but he also looked forward to living eternally in heaven. Whatever the Lord had planned for him, it was His will, and Paul wanted to be in His will. So that is the way he prayed: "Let me know Jesus. Let me be less, let Him be more."

Imitate Paul - How many believers today are praying like Paul? Are you willing to put aside selfish desires, or even staying busy in ministry, for an opportunity to truly know Christ? Have you ever prayed for God to completely erase old thinking patterns, habitual behaviors, and anything in your life that hinders you from getting to know Christ better each day? It's a radical prayer, but it's the beginning of experiencing a revitalized, invigorating, Christian life.