

The Christian's Contentment

Straining Toward the Goal

Philippians 3:12-4:1

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Scripture

The Philippian Church was a mostly healthy church, but Paul was concerned that false teaching might infiltrate the church. After the opening greeting, thanksgiving, and prayer, Paul wanted the Philippians to know that despite his imprisonment, the gospel was still advancing. Then, he urged them to live for Christ. However, like every church in every age the Philippian Church faced the danger of discord and disunity. So, Paul encouraged the believers to strive for spiritual unity, which was based on Christ's example of humility. And, with Christ as the example, Paul urged believers to live as lights in the world, and also to follow the examples of godly Christians. Then, Paul stressed that right standing with God did not come from any personal merit, but solely through the righteousness of Christ. In fact, Paul's great desire was to know Christ more and more.

Let's read about straining toward the goal in Philippians 3:12-4:1:

¹² 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. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

^{4:1} Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. (Philippians 3:12-4:1)

Introduction

Several years ago, I was able to attend one of the Ligonier Conferences in Orlando. If my memory is correct, Dr. R. C. Sproul was speaking during one of the opening sessions. In his own inimitable way, Dr. Sproul was speaking eloquently about the “beatific vision.” I had some notion of what it was, but had not really given the “beatific vision” much thought. Ever since that time, it seemed to me that Dr. Sproul spoke increasingly about the “beatific vision.”

What is the “beatific vision”? It is that moment when a Christian dies and passes into glory and beholds Jesus face-to-face. The *Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines the “beatific vision” as follows, “A term denoting the blessed state of the glorified saints in heaven, where they behold the glory of the Lord and enjoy perfect and sinless communion with Him.”¹

As I read our text for today, it seems to me that Paul is really talking about the beatific vision. He is talking about it in the sense that he is urging the Philippian believers to strain toward the goal of seeing Christ in glory. He wants this more than anything else, and he wants the Philippians to want it too.

¹ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 66.

Lesson

Philippians 3:12-4:1 teaches us what is involved in straining toward the goal of seeing Christ in glory.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Confession (3:12a)
2. Resolve (3:12b)
3. Pursuit (3:13-14)
4. Advice (3:15-16)
5. Imitation (3:17)
6. Warning (3:18-19)
7. Assurance (3:20-21)
8. Exhortation (4:1)

I. Confession (3:12a)

First, confession is involved in straining toward the goal.

Paul writes in verse 12a, **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect....”** What is the **“this”** to which he is referring? Paul is referring to the previous section in which he wrote that he wanted to “gain Christ” (3:8) and “know him” (3:10). He is not referring to the righteousness of Christ, which he has already received. Rather, he wants to “gain Christ” and “know him.” Paul wants to behold Jesus face-to-face. That is why Paul says that he has not **“already obtained this”** or is **“already perfect.”** Paul knows that this will only happen when he beholds Jesus face-to-face.

And so Paul's confession is that he has not yet beheld Jesus face-to-face. He has a spiritual dissatisfaction. He has a holy desire for what he does not have. There is a deep passion in Paul for this.

I think this is what I sensed listening to R. C. Sproul. He spoke of a spiritual dissatisfaction, and a holy desire for what he did not yet have. He longed to behold Jesus face-to-face.

Is this true for you and me? Do we even think about the beatific vision? Do we even think about that moment in glory when we shall behold Jesus face-to-face? And, if we do think about it, do we confess it as a spiritual dissatisfaction with our current state? Do we have a holy desire for what we do not yet have?

II. Resolve (3:12b)

Second, resolve is involved in straining toward the goal.

It seems that Paul's driving resolve was to see Jesus face-to-face. That is why he goes on to say in verse 12b, **"...but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."** Actually, the language in the Greek is a little more colorful. Paul says, "...but I am pursuing, if indeed I may seize [it] for I was seized by Christ Jesus." Paul is thinking of his Damascus Road experience, where Jesus "seized" Paul for himself. Jesus made Paul his own. And, as you know, Paul was dramatically converted, and he was never the same. Now, Paul says, his life resolve is to "seize" Jesus. He lives for him. He serves him. He suffers for him. His entire life is to seize the one who seized him. And, more than anything else, he wants to "seize" Jesus when he sees him face-to-face.

If you are a Christian, Jesus has seized you and made you his own. Your own conversion may not be as dramatic as Paul's was on the Damascus Road. Nevertheless, Jesus has seized you and you belong to him. Is your resolve then to seize Jesus? Do you pursue him to make him your own? Do you read his Word? Do you speak to him in prayer? Do you serve him faithfully in whatever situation you find yourself? Do you long to see Jesus?

III. Pursuit (3:13-14)

Third, pursuit is involved in straining toward the goal.

Paul reiterates in verse 13a what he has been saying in the previous verse. He says, **“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.”** Paul is very conscious that he has not yet arrived. He is not yet perfect. He is certainly a new creation in Christ, but he does not yet see Jesus face-to-face. And so he continues in verses 13b-14, **“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.”**

Paul has a single-minded goal: **“But one thing I do....”** Paul was clearly involved in all kinds of ministry. He was a preacher, teacher, author, pastor, counselor, evangelist, and so on. But, all those roles and functions flow out of his supreme ambition: **“But one thing I do....”**

And what is that **one thing**? Paul goes on to say, **“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.”** Paul forgets the *past*. He strains forward to the *future*. And presses on toward the goal in the *present*. For Paul **“the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”** is the beatific vision. It is beholding Jesus face-to-face. That is Paul's pursuit.

Paul's image here is that of a foot race. Kent Hughes illustrates Paul's single-minded pursuit by telling of a race on August 7, 1954, during the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada. Up until that time, it was the greatest mile-run matchup that ever took place. It was touted as the “miracle mile” because Briton Roger Bannister and Australian John Landy were the only two sub-four-minute milers in the world. Bannister had been the first man ever to run a four-minute mile. Both runners were in peak condition. Roger Bannister strategized that he would relax during the third lap and save everything for his finishing drive. But as they began that third lap, the Australian poured it on, stretching his already substantial lead. Immediately Bannister adjusted his strategy,

increasing his pace and gaining on Landy.

The lead was quickly cut in half, and at the bell for the final lap they were even. Landy began running even faster, and Bannister followed suit. Both men were flying. Bannister felt he was going to lose if Landy did not slow down. Then came the famous moment (replayed thousands of times in print and flickering black and white celluloid) as at the last stride before the home stretch the crowds roared. Landy could not hear Bannister's footfall and looked back, a fatal lapse of concentration. Bannister launched his attack and won the Empire Games that day by five yards.²

John Landy's mistake was that he looked to see **“what lies behind,”** and that cost him the race. Even that momentary glance was enough of a loss of focus and concentration to slow down.

I heard the pre-school teacher say to one of the students this week as they were marching in a single file past my door, “Johnny,³ don't look back at the other students because when you do, you walk all crooked!”

Paul's pursuit is the beatific vision. Paul's pursuit is seeing Jesus face-to-face in glory.

Is that your pursuit? Is that my pursuit?

IV. Advice (3:15-16)

Fourth, advice is involved in straining toward the goal.

Paul says in verse 15, **“Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”** Paul was writing against the false teachers here. They believed that it was possible to attain perfection in this life. Paul did not believe that. Mature Christians know that they are still on the journey toward “where they [will] behold the glory of the Lord and enjoy perfect and sinless communion

² R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 148.

³ Not his real name; I am trying to protect to the little boy's reputation here!

with Him.”

Paul goes on to say to the Philippians in verse 16, **“Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”** Paul wants the Philippians to continue pursuing Jesus. He wants them to continue running the race that they had started.

We do not believe in sinless perfection in this life. We know that the Christian life is a journey, a race, toward the time when we will behold the glory of the Lord and enjoy perfect and sinless communion with him. Let us then continue to hold true to what we have attained.

V. Imitation (3:17)

Fifth, imitation is involved in straining toward the goal.

Paul says in verse 17, **“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”** He switches the metaphor from running a race to walking. Nevertheless, his point is that the Philippians should imitate him and look to the example of others.

It is helpful to keep in mind that when Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians the believers in Philippi did not have Amazon. They could not go online and order multiple versions of the Bible, if they wanted to do so. In fact, apart from the Old Testament, they may not have had any books of the New Testament yet. They would have had oral accounts of Jesus and the lives of some of his disciples. But, the best thing they had was Paul, and the examples of godly Christians, like Timothy and Epaphroditus, whom Paul had already mentioned as examples worth imitating (2:19-30).

We now have the completed Word of God, with both the Old and New Testament. We have multiple versions to read what God requires of his people. So, we are blessed in that regard.

Nevertheless, imitation is still a powerful example and help. I received a video of my 30-month-old grandson running around

in his house. His 8-month-old brother was watching him, while sitting in his walker. As Isaac was running around the house, Sam was looking on intently, and his little feet were moving under the stroller! He was trying to imitate his older brother.

Let us find more mature brothers and sisters in Christ to imitate. Let us spend time with those who can help us on our journey to see Jesus face-to-face.

VI. Warning (3:18-19)

Sixth, warning is involved in straining toward the goal.

Sadly, though, not everyone who professes to be a Christian is in fact a Christian. Paul says of them in verse 18, **“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.”** The Bible is full of warnings to false professors. We must never think that just because a person prays the “sinner’s prayer,” signs a church membership card, gets baptized, and so on, is necessarily a true Christian.

Paul goes on to give four brief warnings of those who make a false profession of faith. He says in verse 19, **“Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”** Paul’s warning is simply that the way we live, the things we desire, the things in which we boast, the things that occupy our thinking tell whether or not we are true Christians. Interestingly, in this warning, Paul says nothing about faith. Instead, he is saying that our lifestyle reveals whether or not we have true faith.

So, let us take heed of Paul’s warning. What captures our thinking? What occupies our time? What causes us delight?

VII. Assurance (3:20-21)

Seventh, assurance is involved in straining toward the goal.

Paul now wanted to assure true believers about their eternal destiny and status. So, he said in verses 20-21, **“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 even to subject all things to himself.”** This is another aspect of what believers look forward to. Jesus has all power. And when he returns, he will transform our bodies into glorified bodies.

This will, of course, only take place at the Second Coming of Jesus. When we die, our bodies go into the ground and our spirits go to heaven. It is in that moment of death that believers will see Jesus face-to-face. And then we will wait for the consummation of all things, when Jesus returns a second time, and inaugurates the new heaven and the new earth. It is at that time that we shall receive glorified bodies.

So, let us be assured that a glorified body awaits us in glory.

VIII.Exhortation (4:1)

And finally, exhortation is involved in straining toward the goal.

Paul concludes this section in verse 1 of chapter 4, **“Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”** This is now the thirteenth time in this letter that Paul has used the word **“joy.”** He also speaks most endearingly of his **“brothers,”** **“whom [he] loves,”** and his **“beloved.”** It is from passages like this that we glean that Philippians was Paul's favorite church.

Paul's final exhortation to mature believers is simply, **“...stand firm thus in the Lord.”** In other words, believe that you will see Jesus face-to-face. Know that he has seized you. Therefore, live your life so as to seize him. Pursue the Lord with purpose and passion.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of the beatific vision in Philippians 3:12-4:1, let us press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Eric Liddell was known as “the flying Scotsman,” whose story was made famous in *Chariots of Fire*. He was chosen to run in the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. He refused to run on Sunday, and so did not compete in his best events, the 100-meter race and 4 × 100 relay. But he did run in the 200- and 400-meter races. Eric Liddell won a bronze medal in the 200-meter race. And he amazed the world by winning the 400-meter race in a new world record.

After the Olympics, Liddell completed his studies, and then went to serve as a missionary in China with the China Inland Mission. In 1932, he married Florence Mackenzie. In 1941, because of the war, he sent his wife and three daughters to Canada. In 1943, he was interned in a Japanese Internment Camp. It was a school, and I actually met a lady years ago who was a student in that Internment Camp. “Uncle Eric,” as all the students called him, served Christ faithfully in very difficult circumstances. Sadly, however, in 1945, at the age of forty-three, Eric Liddell died of a brain tumor. He was buried in the Internment Camp in a grave marked with a wooden cross. He was eventually interred in the Mausoleum of Martyrs in Shijiazhuang, China. In a sense, Eric Liddell died running. He epitomized the truth of Paul’s teaching: **“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.”**

May that be true of you and me. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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