

2021-02-27-Press On-PM

Press On
Philippians 3:12-16
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As you are with us this morning for today's sermon, please turn in your Bibles to Philippians chapter 3. We are going to be in our next paragraph, verses 12 through 16, in our series, Our Joy in Christ. And as we've looked at Philippians in this series, we have seen a consistent thread, a thread of Paul's affection for Christ and his affection for Philippians. And together they share in unity and joy, friendship and partnership in the gospel. And in that sharing, there is mutual joy to see the gospel advance forward on behalf of those who don't know Christ, and a deep desire for the gospel to progress within those who do follow Christ.

So, hear now as I read today's scripture passage from Philippians chapter 3, verses 12 through 16. Paul writes,

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 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 in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let us pray. Father in heaven, bless our time as we interact with your Word, as you speak to us by your Spirit in your Word. And would you help me to be clear. Would you help me to be encouraging. Would you help me to point all of us in this room now and those joining on the livestream, may we see Christ. See him as good, and beautiful, and trustworthy, and worthy of all our praise in all of our life, to be 'full send' in the Gospel. We praise this in Jesus's name. Amen.

If you maybe have little ones, like we do, Elev8 Basketball finished their final games of their regular season yesterday. And it's been so fun to watch players compete. It's been a joy to watch players improve over the course of the season. And my daughter's a little bit younger, so I've definitely been seeing that improvement as the year has progressed. And we see the development of fundamentals, like dribbling with your head up. We see making that crisp bounce pass with the right angle, with the right force to get to get to their teammate. And those basic skills are built and then further developed in ways that they allow the player, the athlete to adapt to more challenging situations, like when they're under pressure from two defenders coming at them to set a trap. What is that player to do? With their head up, they can see that it's

coming and they can also see when their teammates have shifted, and they can make that quick pass. Basic fundamentals are built upon for the player to enjoy the game and to play the game.

Like athletes learning basketball or anything for that matter, people intuitively seek personal growth in their lives. We want to progress pass where we are today and press forward to where we want to be tomorrow. That's a video game, waiting to get past the tutorials, to get going in the mechanics of the game. That's to an instrument you want to play. It's a relationship that you're wanting to move past chit-chat and further develop friendship. We're seeking progress forward.

But we might in that pursuit, we might actually realize that we're mesmerized by the wrong goals. Or maybe we're weighed down by burdens, or we're dulled by distractions. From last week, we looked at Paul's own story, his joy in Christ. And he writes about true worship. He writes about following the path that is true gain. And he anchors such a reality upon God's righteousness through faith in Jesus. And now in our verses today, he's framing this present gain in Christ in light of his future hope in Christ. And so Paul is continuing his story, not only where he's come from, but he's continuing the story about what is his hope. And he centers this on the proceeding verses, in verses 10 through 11, specifically. But it's how the power of the resurrection gives us the frame to pursue Christian maturity. The resurrection gives us the frame to pursue Christian maturity.

So we're going to look at these verses in three key points, three key words: present reality, present activity, and present progress.

So first you look at verse 12. We see that the resurrection frames the present reality of the Christian's future maturity. He says in verse 12, 'not that I have this already or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' Paul is saying something very profound. Christianity is not merely about self-actualization, self-progress that just gains maturity through raw effort. You know the right things. You learn the right information. You start doing and practicing, you're going to mature. It isn't merely that. And remember in earlier in this chapter, verses 4 through 9, Paul is no longer placing his confidence in his ethnic heritage, his religious piety, or even his personal achievements as the grounds for righteousness before God. Instead, Paul is counting that as lost, and he's looking to what is gained. And he now defines that in the confidence that he has in Christ alone, trusting in the righteousness from God that depends on faith in Christ alone.

And so we go from that beautiful reality of what is sure, what is accomplished, and here in verse 12, Paul is acknowledging that though that is true of him, he has not yet arrived. And in recognizing that he has not yet arrived, he does not settle where he is. He presses on. And we'll come back to this word in a few moments. But it's important for us to look at this question. What is the pursuit of his pressing? He pursues what he emphasizes in verse 10 and 11, to know Christ, to know the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and to reach the day of final resurrection.

So knowing the pursuit, it's important to know the power of this pressing. And the answer to the power gets to the heart of this present reality of our maturity in Christ. He is

pressing for a reality that is already his in Christ. The ongoing pursuit of the Christian life is first established in the already, being held by Christ. He's playing with the word here. He's pressing on to make it his own, because Christ has already made it, him, his own. That is the very power at which he presses on.

You see the gospel says you can't catch God, because God has caught you first. The gospel says you can't claim you have God, because God has already claimed you first. And the gospel says you can't love God, until God has already loved you first.

Now, you may think, as you reflect upon your life, you may think that your life is lived in a way that will be good enough to be noticed by God, good enough to have a reputation, maybe from your peers or your family. But I wonder if some of you also perhaps think that God dangles a carrot out in front of you, that is forever out your reach. Or that God is that stick that drives you forward with no rest. You know you are supposed to be better, but you continue to fall short. And you want to grow, but you are stuck where you live, where you have been for years. And so to you, the hope that we have the resurrection that gives us the frame of mind is this good news of Christ. He is neither the carrot or the stick.

The Christian's present reality is already love. The Christian's reality in the present is already secure. And so Christian maturity is established first in this present reality of him making us his own. It's out of that sure foundation that we can, and that we must press on, becoming and experiencing more and more the fullness of what we already have in Christ, which brings us to our second point,

Verses 13 and 14 addresses how the resurrection frames the present activity of the Christian's final maturity. And again there in verse 13, Paul qualifies his present progress as not being complete. Your translations might say 'perfect.' Others might say 'not complete.' This idea: finality, completed-ness. Paul acknowledges where he is currently with humility and honesty. But he doesn't focus on what he is lacking. Rather Paul is single-minded in what he focuses and where he is going, because he knows who he is trusting. And he rejoices in the one who provides this gain in all things.

This is his pursuit. This is his pressing on. He focuses on where he is going, because he knows who he is trusting. And he knows where he is going, because he's also rejoicing in all that has gained. And so this is the Christian's life. It is lived between what is already in Christ, and what is not yet, but will be, in Christ, in the future. We live between two spaces. What is already, but not yet, but will be.

Paul uses the word for 'press on' three times in this chapter. We see it in verse 12. We see it in verse 14. But we also see it in this chapter, verse 6, where he describes his zeal. His zeal that compelled him to persecute Christians. The word for 'press on' carries a sense of running, moving forward rapidly, decisively, that can carry on that sense of harassment. And where it comes to why it is being used with, is persecution. In Paul's former life, he pursued the objective of what he thought was spiritual service to God. His former pursuit was his boasting in his own forms of self-righteousness. But now. But now Paul has been found in Christ Jesus. And whereas Paul once persecuted the church, he is now the one who is pursuing and living his

life for the sake of the church. What he was once willing to harm and kill in the name of that pursuit, he is now willing to lay down his own life and be killed, to accept persecution, because he's resting in the righteousness from God in Christ.

So his pursuit, the activity of the pursuit doesn't change, but the object changes. And what is his new object, his new objective. He illustrates this with a metaphor from running, running a race. A metaphor for athleticism, pursuing a goal, pursuing the prize of winning. This metaphor, instead of winning a leafy crown that sets you upon a pedestal, as the victor today but withers and dries up tomorrow. The goal of the race and the prize of meeting the goal now become one and the same in Christ. It is this heavenly calling from God in Christ, the goal in the metaphor and the prize in the metaphor, are now intersecting with the pursuit of Christ.

As a runner, his eyes are fixed only on that goal. He is not distracted by what is behind him. He not only has the goal in mind, but his eyes are fixed forward. He gives no attention to what is behind. He gives no attention to what is beside him. As a runner, you turn your head beside and start to worry what's behind, you start slowing down and you start losing time. And though a different metaphor, this forgetting is similar to him counting all things as lost as he described earlier in chapter 3. The forgetting does not become an aimless bliss. No. Paul stretches. Paul leans forward propelling all of himself toward the finish line.

This image certainly gives us much to ponder and to reflect upon our own pursuit of Christ. Have we forgotten what race we are in? Are we held back from what lies behind? Are we being hindered from pressing on? This is for you, the individual Christian. Yes. But remember also this is for the corporate body. This is for the church to consider. Where you see the thread of joy and the thread of unity that comes through Philippians is culminating on Christ. Because when you have external pressures, when you have internal pains, these things dull our vision. They distract us from the race. We forget what we are pursuing and the prize. We no longer are looking at Christ.

And you see, as we think about this present activity, the resurrection frames this pursuit. It frames our motivation. And we find ourselves maturing in Christ because we're not doing it in our own strength. But we are resting in the power of the resurrection. He gives us the very empowerment to pursue that present activity.

And of course, this now naturally, in Paul's argument, leads us to verse 15 and 16 in the third aspect of his present progress. The resurrection frames that present progress of the Christian's finished maturity. Look at verses 15 and 16. Let those of us who are mature think this way. And if anything you think otherwise, God will that also reveal to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Maturity in Christ involves humility that you haven't arrived. But maturity in Christ involves a confidence in the work of God that is being done in you. And that you are maturing. When I'm hiking, I never think I'm getting anywhere until I maybe stop for the day and I look at my maps. And I realize how far I've come. It's rarely in the process do you see and feel and experience that maturing, that progress. But it is to trust in that confidence in the work of God in you, that you are indeed maturing.

Paul is encouraging the Philippians to persevere. And he's inviting himself, rather inviting them, to follow his example. That will be more of our topic the next time we look at these verses, the next set of verses. Following and imitating those that are following Christ.

So not only is Paul humble and honest about his own progress in the faith. He's also honest and encouraging to the Philippians in their progress in the faith. He recognizes that all that he has said, follow with me, all that he has said, all the way from chapter 1 verses 27 through chapter 2 verse 18 and the later in chapter 3, verses 1 through 10. These big chunks of his letter, Paul is saying that the foundations of Christian maturity are found in this path of the gospel, the very gospel that Christ proclaimed with his words and that he lived with his life.

And this foundational maturity is also something that you have to, with encouragement, kind of like also with hiking down the trail, you get discouraged because you don't think you're going anywhere. But you have to recognize that what took Paul years to both understand about the gospel and to have it form in his life, his character, his attitude, the way he intentionally lived his life, does not happen with a blink of an eye, does not happen like a light switch being turned on. So we have to, not only, we take great encouragement from Paul, that even he recognized that he had more to press on toward. May you be encouraged in similar ways.

Because we often reduce maturity to our cognitive, our brain, our thinking, as that is what understanding means, we limit the full range of what Paul is saying, about 'think this way.' He uses this word, *think*, you may recall that he's used it already throughout the letter. He uses it 10 times throughout the whole letter, and he uses it at least once in every chapter. The word certainly involves our mind, involves our thinking, but it also includes our attitudes, our disposition. And maturity from this perspective that is found in the scripture, it is both having the understanding and having wisdom. Wisdom to embody and activate the very understanding moment by moment, circumstance by circumstance. Christian maturity does involve progress and development. You learn something new from the scriptures and you apply it to your worship and life to the glory of God. This is why it is often exciting when you're a new Christian, because new information has direct impact on your life. But how goes it when you're walking with the Lord through decades and there's not much new to learn. And yet Paul is saying with pressing on, is that there are new layers of the gospel that brings life and maturity to you in Christ.

So there is progress. There is development. But Christian maturity also involves what I like to call a thickening. Think of a pot of stew. All the ingredients are already in that pot. It's on a slow heat. You've got time. You're stirring. And together, in all those components, the stew reduces down and thickens. And all the ingredients become kind of incorporated together, and what might have been, kind of like, ok at the beginning, is just perfect after a few hours. The time it takes to thicken is also what it is to mature in Christ.

It's also like a tree. You think about a tree. It grows only certain times of the year, because the rest of the year, it's thickening from the inside. The way it has grown externally, the inside has to catch up. And so it is with our maturity in Christ. Pressing on in Christ is the progress of faith, that is forward in our application but it's also inward in our dependence. And

so for us today is: look at these verses. How might the resurrection frame your progress in your maturity in Christ?

Think back when you first heard the gospel and you first believed. Your love for the world and the love that you have for your self is confronted with the very truth and the very love of God for his world, his creation, that included you. And it transforms you. It brings you from death to life. And we move from trusting ourselves to depending on God. And as we grow in our faith in Christ, we move, we follow Jesus as our savior. And we begin to seek to follow him more and more as our teacher. We abide in the Word, and we commit to love his church. Through our life of repentance and faith, not just when we first believed; but the pattern of the Christian life, we seek to put off the old self and put on Christ. Not because we are not in Christ, but because remember what Paul says, because Christ has made me his own. That is the motivation. That is the context for which we now seek to put off the old and put on the new, to grow in Christ.

We long to experience that, to bear fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to put off more and more of our sinful patterns and put on more and more of that which reflects the beauty and the holiness of God. As we mature, we have to depend more and more upon his grace. We long to obey, and that's in the proper context. That it's not to perform, to earn his pleasure, or to somehow grant a sense of self-satisfaction. But rather, it's a response of gratitude and thankfulness for how he is working in our lives.

And a maturing disciple grows in demonstrating Christ-like character. It's engaging in dependent prayer, and it seeks to participate in God's mission in word and deed. Our understanding deepens. Our affection for Christ strengthens. And our lives reflect his work more and more as we seek to love others.

So this is the power of the resurrection for our present realities. Whether we are experiencing pleasure or pain, whether we are experiencing hardship or evil, we press on in pursuit of Christ. He is the goal. He is the prize. Paul Miller, in his book, *The J Curve*, he writes: *a resurrection lens*. Think about the word *frame*, like the lens by which you view your life. A resurrection lens allows us to live truly victorious lives, that can look any enemy in the face: cancer, slander, or depression. Jesus's past resurrection means we experience present, real-time resurrections, as we wait for the future big one, that is, the final resurrection, when all creation will be resurrected, when all things will be made new. And so for you Christian, this morning, what bearing does the resurrection have on your present, right now?

To think upon what it might mean for you to grow in the understanding of the gospel, to think of these things, to grow in maturity so that you are progressing in the faith, that you are depending upon the Lord and the power of the resurrection is bearing fruit in your life.

The resurrection frames our present progress in light of the Christian's finished maturity. It is the very living, it is the very breathing, to the glory of God, and the joy of Christ. But not all of life is rosy. In Dick Keyes book, *Seeing Through Cynicism*, he quotes this social historian, Daniel Boorstin, who was writing in the sixties. In the essay, in a writing from Boorstin in 1962, he's writing about what he phrases *extravagant expectations*. Extravagant expectations in

modern life. So it is an extended quote but I find it very revealing and important for us as we look at these passages. And just consider the events of this week.

Boorstin writes: *When we pick up our newspapers at breakfast, we expect. We even demand that it bring us momentous events since the night before. We turn on the car radio as we drive to work and expect news to have occurred since the morning newspaper went to press. We expect our two week vacation to be romantic, exotic, cheap, and effortless. We expect a far away atmosphere if we go to a nearby place. And we expect everything to be relaxing, sanitary and Americanized if we go to a far away place. We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious, luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive. We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to the church of our choice and yet feel it's guiding power over us, to revere God and to be god. Never have people more been the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer.*

Now compare this to one of our denomination's missionary directors, who recently was conveying a conversation he had with a pastor in Kyiv. *I talked to this pastor in Kyiv, which is now Saturday. After last night's bombing, he didn't get much sleep. But he was still preparing his sermon for church tomorrow. If the church is still standing, he plans to make his way there and hold services.*

That first quote resonates with us, even from 1960, does it not? And maybe even more so. A hashtag that I like to use on my twitter is that #NeilPostmanWasRight. If you ever read his work, we are gluttons for infotainment. We find that we need more information, more knowledge, and we find ourselves with less wisdom and less understanding.

And so the first quote from Boorstin reveals our anxious hearts. But the second quote as we're watching unprecedented times. I remember, as a kid, the Gulf War was on TV. And now in my middle years, I'm watching war in all new digital spaces. It's overwhelming. It's painful, scary. It's inspiring. The war's tragic and terrible. And the second quote models a courageous faith that has eyes set on the goal. And that makes all the difference, and how the race is run. So, as we think about the power of the resurrection in our lives. As we try to come to grips with what's happening, historically, right now on the continent of Europe, but also what is scarily and closely connected to what we don't even know what might be. We come to realize the power of the resurrection, to have the frame for our present realities, our present activities, and the very present progress that we make in our maturity in pursuit of Christ. And we can come because of Christ.

We can look back to Psalm 46 with various verses that we can claim and we can have faith and trust and dependance, *that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.*

Later on starting in verse 6... *the nations rage. The kingdoms totter. He utters His voice. The earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us. Come behold the works of the Lord. How He has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.*

And we are watching on TikTok and Twitter and the news, we are watching in real time the devastation of war. We are watching the courage of people that are inspiring nations. But may we as God's people welcome the Lord's providence. May we love the Lord, and love what He loves: justice and mercy and humility. May we be prayerful. May peace come quickly. May suffering be minimal. May the Lord, though, raise up many who are present in the suffering of others. And as we see in this passage that Paul invites the Philippians, and therefore he is inviting you. He's inviting Christians today into the present strivings that have the fixed hope upon the sure attainment of the final resurrection. It is set on the future, and that future frames the present. The present life shaped by the life of Christ in His humility, His service, His love, a life that enters into suffering to serve and love others. So that they might know Christ, so that they might know the power of his resurrection. And this reality cannot be successful; it cannot be attained in mere strength, ability or power. Christian maturity is completed-ness that begins at our conversion, becomes our present reality, and present activity, and is the very thing to look to as our present progress, that will be finished upon the completion of all things in the resurrection and the life to come. Let us press on with eyes fixed on Christ.

Let us pray. Father in heaven, we give you thanks and praise. We bring our pain. We bring our fears. We recognize that we often are not living in the power of the resurrection. And so Lord, we are grateful that is inspiring to see it in others. May we look to the church throughout history, more recent times to see where it has struggled with persecution, even by its own brothers and sisters. May we look to righteousness of God in Christ. May we pursue joy and unity in the gospel, seeking your prize which is Christ. Help us in these things, O Lord, for we cannot do without you. In Jesus's name, Amen.