

Press On Towards The Goal

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn back to the passage which we read, Philippians chapter 3, and we're going to consider this evening a couple of verses in the second half of the chapter, verses 13 and 14.

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 towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Goals and focus play a huge part in our lives. They shape the direction and maybe even at times the character of our lives, and the apostle Paul knew this very well.

He knew also how disastrously having the wrong goals and focus could shape a person's life. Well, he knew how that had happened in his own experience prior to his coming to faith in the Lord Jesus, as he describes even in this chapter.

He was a persecutor of the church because he was so zealous for the old ways, or at least what they perceived to be the old ways, in reality it was a misinterpretation of those ways, but he was so zealous for these things that he persecuted the church.

[1 : 5 7] And so he's concerned that the believers in Philippi, and indeed any believers who would happen to read this letter, and the practice was to send the letters round the churches, for other churches to benefit as well.

The concern that he has is that they would set their goals and their focus correctly.

And in seeking to do this, he sets before them his own focus. He first of all shows that he doesn't think he's arrived.

He acknowledges where he's at, the reality of it. He doesn't pretend that he's attained everything, and that he is some kind of super Christian.

You know, we might look at Paul's life and come to that conclusion fairly easily, thinking Paul must have been some kind of super Christian because of some of the things that he did, but he wasn't, and he was acutely aware of that himself.

[3 : 1 6] So he acknowledges the reality of where he's at. But he also shows that one of, there are basically two things that he does in seeking to set his focus as it should be.

The first is to put the things that hinder out of the way. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

He has two thrusts to this. There are certain things that need to go out of sight. And Jesus needs to be put front and centre.

He needs to be the main focus. And that is what he does. And he highlights that he presses on to where he wants to be.

He leaves behind the things that are not where they should, you know, not being, the things from not being where we should be. And he presses on towards the things, towards Jesus really, where he needs to be, where he wants to be.

[4 : 3 3] And so he highlights for them these three important aspects of really making genuine spiritual progress in our lives.

So first of all, then he acknowledges where things are at. I do not consider that I have made it my own.

He doesn't think that he's already attained that place of perfection that he is aiming for. He wants to serve Jesus perfectly.

He wants to live his life in a way that would be perfectly honouring to Jesus. But he knows that he hasn't attained that. Now we might say to ourselves, well, he was a lot closer to attaining that than I am.

And that may or may not be true. But the point is that he recognises that he hasn't attained that. And he encourages the believers in Philippi and us also to acknowledge the reality.

[5 : 41] It's important to acknowledge the reality. If we don't acknowledge where we're at, we generally don't move on from where we're at because we probably just aren't thinking about it.

We're just drifting through things. There's a terrible tendency for us to do that as followers of Jesus, as Christians, to drift through our lives.

The devil loves it when people simply drift through life and don't have any clear aim or purpose in what they're doing.

Paul encourages the believers in Philippi to not be like that, to look at the reality of the situation and realise that there's a long way to go.

Now that might sound like an incredibly discouraging statement or an incredibly discouraging observation to say, man, I have so far to go.

[6 : 50] But you know, if we just don't think about it at all, we won't go anywhere. We'll just stagnate and shrivel as we were thinking about in the morning service.

Our spiritual lives will shrivel up. But that is not what the scriptures encourage us to do. We are encouraged to take a realistic look at where we are, but in doing so to realise that what that means is that we need to turn to the Lord and seek more of His grace to enable us to live for His glory and to recognise that there is a goal there for us, that we haven't reached.

And until we set it as a goal, we're not going to come anywhere near reaching it because God wants us to have that focus and that goal in our lives if we are to progress spiritually, not by our own strength, of course, but by the grace of God.

Of course, we know that we're not going to achieve perfection in this life, but that shouldn't stop us aiming high.

The renowned 19th century minister, Robert Murray Machin, who was a pretty young man really when he went to glory, he hadn't even reached his 30th year, 27 if I remember correctly, but he wrote this once in his diary, Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.

[8 : 46] Now, Robert Murray Machin didn't make that prayer because he wanted to make a show of his righteousness. He wanted that because he wanted to glorify and honour God in his life.

He wanted to do what God had called him to do and to honour the Lord in all his ways. And surely that should be if we are believers, if we trust in and follow Jesus, surely that should be our great desire as well.

And to aim high, to look for this grace that we need to bring us on in our Christian lives.

That was Paul's desire. That was Paul's desire for the believers whom he ministered to.

And that is really what he is encouraging them towards by asking them to make an honest, a realistic assessment of where they are at.

[9 : 58] Not to discourage, but to encourage them to seek to fulfil God's purpose for their lives.

Not to feel defeated, but to drive us to lay hold of the one who is perfect and who is the only one who can bring us in that direction.

And who will ultimately bring our lives to perfection when we are brought into glory. In this life there will always be the taint and the influence of sin, but when we are brought into glory that will be wiped away.

And we will know perfection then, but we can be brought along the road towards that in this life as well.

And we are commanded to seek that, to seek to be holy as he is holy. Because if we don't look for this then we will not progress.

[11 : 05] If we don't look for it we won't pray for this. If we don't look for it we won't read the Scriptures with that desire in our hearts.

If we don't look for that we are not looking to God to work that in us, but that is what we are encouraged to look for.

You know the self-contented person doesn't make any real progress in their lives.

They think they are just good enough the way they are. That there is nothing that needs to change. But if we look at the Scriptures honestly and use the Scriptures in a sense like a mirror, the reflection that we see coming back often is not exactly encouraging in one sense because we see so much of our own sin when we do that.

The Scriptures shine a light into our experience and show us our shortcomings. But of course the Scriptures also show us the solution.

[12 : 29] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the power of the resurrection at work in the life of the believer.

That is the great encouragement that we are given. Paul also shows that his progress in this way, his setting his goals in the right way so that he will move forward.

One aspect of that is also that he forgets what lies behind. He puts the past in the past.

Now Paul encourages us here to put certain things behind us so that they won't overwhelm our minds or distract us from the real purpose of our lives.

But of course we have to understand that in the right way. This isn't about pretending that the past hasn't happened. It's about taking the point where we find ourselves acknowledging our shortcomings and seeking to move on from there so that these things move into the past.

[14 : 07] Forgetting these things in the sense that they no longer loom large in our consciousness like stumbling blocks in our way, preventing us from moving forward.

Now when a person is seeking to for instance learn to play a musical instrument, if a not very good musical tutor was to say to the person, you're rubbish at that, and to say you might as well just give up and not bother anymore.

Do you think well of course maybe with a kind of reverse psychology it might drive the person to actually try and do better but for many people it would just totally discourage them and they would just give up.

But if they have a good tutor who recognises their potential and sees that with hard work and perseverance they may progress and move forward, they are encouraged to recognise yes that there are issues, there are things that they're struggling with in terms of their playing but to address these issues so that they move into the past and no longer are issues once they're addressed, they move into the past to the point where they're forgotten.

You know for instance a person might be learning to play the chanta which was a pretty common experience for people going through school in the western Isles and something I did myself and you're trying to learn some of the grace notes and the embellishment and making a dog's dinner of it maybe.

[16 : 22] Now if someone comes along and says oh you might as well just give up, that's not encouraging. And that becomes a stumbling block.

But if a person comes to them and says you know just take your time, work through this, you can do it, you can work through this and make this something that is no longer an issue for you.

And you know when the time, the kindness and the effort is put into that so that a person learns these things so that they become like second nature, they're no longer issues, that worry and that concern that they may have had, that anxiety that they may have had because they weren't doing well disappears because they no longer really think about it because it becomes like second nature.

Now why am I saying this, well it's like this, these things are opportunities, the difficulties that come out of way are opportunities.

The scriptures encourage us to lay hold of God's grace, to turn to the Lord and seek His grace to enable us to address these issues.

[17 : 52] The devil will come and say you're never going to get past this. This is always going to be a problem, this is always going to be an issue, it's just give up now.

God comes alongside us and He encourages us to trust Him, to trust His grace and His enabling so that we will move forward and move past and beyond these things so that these issues become things that are in one sense forgotten.

They're not something that are at the forefront of our minds. Yes we thank God that He's brought us through these things but our focus is not on these issues.

Our focus is on Jesus and seeking Him. We use if we follow the encouragement that we are given, we use these things as an opportunity to move forward, like a kind of launch pad.

These are opportunities for God's grace to be poured out in our experience. The hindrance is often a lack of faith.

[19 : 13] We're not ready to believe that God can work in such a way in our lives. But God wants us to put these things into the past and to get on with the more important things, to put our service for Him ahead of everything else, to put Jesus front and centre in our experience.

But we also see that He encourages us to see that we need to strain forward to what lies ahead, to press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Now God's goal for our lives is that we would live 100% for Jesus and by the grace of Jesus.

God encourages us to set this as the real God-given goal for our lives. Now this doesn't mean that we're all going to become full-time missionaries or ministers or evangelists.

It means that God gives our lives no matter what our situation, purpose and meaning.

[20 : 55] As a teacher or as a shop assistant or as a manager or as a pensioner, that God and the things of God are what our lives are really focused on.

So that we honour Him in whatever we do, so that whatever we do, we seek to do it to the glory of God.

Now Paul of course recognizes that we may have a whole set of lesser goals.

Some of these may be necessary and some may be unnecessary and simply are clutter in our lives that get in the way. But we need to prioritise what is necessary and get rid of what is unnecessary.

Just as a marathon runner for instance needs to set aside the things that are going to hold them back. For instance they're not going to carry a large pack in their backs unless it's absolutely necessary.

[22 : 17] For instance, certain types of races that might be necessary but for most races that's not necessary. So they're going to get rid of anything like that. They're going to reduce the weight of the clothing that they have, they'll reduce the weight of their bodies as well if that is going to help them have the edge to win the race.

They're going to get rid of anything that is a hindrance and they're going to focus their minds on the matter as well.

There may be psychological hindrances that are preventing them from doing their best and they deal with these things also.

What Paul is encouraging us to do is to strain forward to lay hold of this great goal and in doing so these other things are set aside.

Part of that effort in seeking to put classed at the centre means other things need to go or at least have a lesser priority in our experience.

[23 : 36] You know that issue of priority is an important one. For instance, you can think maybe of a tradesman who takes on far too many jobs and of course what happens then is that all the jobs suffer as he tries to go from one to another with his mind on one thing and another and of course he doesn't do the kind of job that he should because his focus is not on the job as it should be because he has too many other things cluttering his mind from other jobs.

And we need to get our goal and our focus right. Is Jesus really the goal and focus of your life?

To serve him, to obey him, to honour him, is it your greatest desire to make him known and to see his kingdom come?

This is the focus that the scripture set before us as the kind of focus that is appropriate for the believer, not only appropriate but necessary if things are going to move forward as they should.

Otherwise the energies of God's people are going to be dissipated in all kinds of other things.

[25 : 21] They may not be bad things in one of themselves. Some of them may be very necessary but if they are not done with this great goal in mind then it's a dissipation of the energy that God has given to us to use for his glory.

You know we're calls in the scriptures to eat and drink to God's glory but it's not just the eating and the drinking but using the energy that we receive from these things to the glory of God and our mental energy.

Of course God grants us the strength that we need but we have a responsibility to use that well and to focus it for the kingdom of God because nothing else is more important.

You know there are some things that need to be done but sometimes we can say to ourselves well such and such thing needs done but we can easily miss out things that are far more important.

For instance apparently tomorrow there's going to be quite a gale. It seems kind of almost impossible looking at the weather today but that's what the forecast is saying.

[26 : 51] Now if you had put up a shed through the wick and you said to yourself well I need to paint this shed before the rain comes and before the wind comes the storm is coming.

Well that would be good and well if that was necessary to be done but if that shed had not actually been anchored to the ground and you know a gale is coming, painting it is a waste of time because the paint is not going to stop the shed getting blown away and smashed to some of the rains.

We need to set the first things first, put Jesus front and centre, make him the great goal of our lives, making Jesus known the great goal of our lives as individuals as the church.

And we need to pray for this, to pray that we see this happen, to pray that we see our own lives stirred up with a passion for the glory of Jesus with a longing to see his kingdom come.

Now it's probably quite an easy thing for us to say in one sense I'm a Christian so my focus is on Jesus.

[28 : 40] Now we thought about this on Thursday night in the prayer meeting about the church in Ephesus and when the letter in Revelation that comes to the church in Ephesus acknowledges that yes they are committed in many ways but that they had forsaken their first love.

That's a really challenging thought because it's very easy for us to say well yes I'm a Christian but what does our life say as has been quoted in many a sermon I'm sure but I think it is a useful quote I don't even know where it comes from originally but if you were taken to court for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to condemn you if such a charge were ever brought in a court of law?

It's a challenging thought. Now hopefully that would be true of us that we would have that evidence in our lives that Jesus does have that place of importance but you know is it really how it should be?

I'm also reminded of something that is mentioned in the discipleship explored course in one of the videos where a man who has worked in an office for a number of years and is well loved by the other staff members he's a Christian a believer but he's never spoken to them about Jesus and when he's leaving they give him a gift of a Buddhist book it's called the book of the dead and he's appalled because you don't even know that he's a Christian.

This is there the evidence there in our lives where people recognise that yes Jesus is important to us.

[31 : 15] It's a challenging question I think probably for every one of us if we're honest but these challenging questions we need to ask ourselves these challenging questions every now and again to challenge ourselves to seek more of God's grace to seek to make our lives count for the kingdom of God that our lives would be honouring to God.

I mean you might say in a way God doesn't need us for these things but God has so ordered things that it is his purpose and his delight to work through his children and to use them to further his purposes in this world and so these words although they're very challenging they bring us this great encouragement that God has a purpose for his people.

He has works of service that he's prepared beforehand for us to walk in them as Paul says writing to the Ephesians.

Of course the most important question for anyone who doesn't know Jesus is when are you going to turn to him?

Are you going to turn before it's too late? Are you going to put your faith in him before it's too late? But for those of us who are believers the question is do we want our lives to fulfil the purpose that God has for them in every way and as much to his glory as can be then may God help us to set our priorities in this way and to seek greater things, greater gospel blessing in our own lives and in the lives of others.

[33 : 39] Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you for your word. We thank you that it constantly challenges us but it also constantly encourages us to place our faith more and more in you, to rely on you more and more.

O Lord God we do pray that you would bless each and every one of us, grant us the grace to have this great goal before our eyes that Jesus would be our greatest goal.

His honour, His glory serving him and Lord may we also seek and pray for the holiness, the righteousness, the justice that inevitably follows in that line as we follow Him, as we serve Him.

Give us for our shortcomings, help us to put the past in the past and by your grace to move forward and to honour you, all that we pray, we pray in Jesus' precious name.

Amen. Let's throw our service to a conclusion singing from the words of Psalm 72 in the Scottish Psalter.

[35 : 18] These great words at the end of this great messianic Psalm. His name forever shall endure, last like the sun it shall, men shall be blessed in him and blessed all nations so him call.

Now blessed be the Lord our God, the God of Israel, for he alone doth wanderers works in glory that excel and blessed be his glorious name to all eternity, the whole earth let his glory fill our men so let it be.

His name forever shall endure, last like the sun it shall, men shall be blessed in In heaven, unblest, all nations shall recall.

Now bless it be, the Lord our God, the God of Israel.

For He alone does wondrous works in glory of itself.

[37 : 00] Unblest be His glorious name to all eternity.

The whole earth let His glory fill, Amen, so let it be.

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.