

Pressing Toward the Goal

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Life in Christ is like running a race in which His people press on toward victory.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Philippians

Before Paul became an apostle of Jesus Christ, he was a “righteous” man. In his own words, he was confident of his standing before God:

Circumcised the eighth day; of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; regarding the law, a Pharisee; regarding zeal, persecuting the church; regarding the righteousness that is in the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:5-6)

But Paul’s experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed all that. Once he persecuted the church; now he was persecuted for preaching the gospel. In fact, he penned his Letter to the Philippians from prison (1:7). Once his confidence was in himself; now his sole confidence lay in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. How is such a transformation possible? The gospel!

Where do you tend to put your confidence for your standing before God?



Group Time

Point 1: Run the race without hindrances (Phil. 3:7-11).

⁷ But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, ¹¹ assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.

What is the Christian life? How is the Christian's outlook on life different from the world's? Paul described life in Christ as running a race (1 Cor. 9:24; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:7). The runners need a focused outlook; therefore, they must lay aside everything that slows down and hinders, which includes *sin* and *distractions* (Heb. 12:1).



What are some distractions people should be willing to count as a loss because of Christ?

We can more easily lay aside our hindrances when we, like Paul, understand the all-surpassing value of knowing Jesus and His righteousness. Paul had come to realize that nothing of his own merit or good work could inherit eternal life. His only hope, and ours, is the righteousness of Christ granted to us by faith in Christ. With this mind-set, we are free to run the race set before us.



Why should the gift of Christ's righteousness through faith free us to run the race of the Christian life?



Voices from Church History

"What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has in a way that no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?"¹

—J. I. Packer (1926-2020)

Point 2: Run the race, pressing forward toward the goal (Phil. 3:12-14).

¹² Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus.

¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, ¹⁴ I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

The Christian life is one of discipline and striving toward a goal. It is not easy and it requires effort, hence Paul's use of athletic imagery in this passage. We cannot coast through this race but must pursue the prize. Yet we do so because the prize has already been won for us. Christ Jesus ran the perfect race to the end to assure us that our goal would be waiting for us. So we can forget the past, with all of its failures and heartaches, and press forward in forgiveness with confidence, knowing what we are aiming for.

Sanctification: Scripture speaks of sanctification as a present _____ (we have already been sanctified) and as a continuing _____. Sanctification affects the whole of a person, transforming one's heart, mind, and character to reflect that of _____.

What is the prize that believers are to pursue? In verse 8, Paul said he counted everything as a loss so he might gain Christ! In verse 11, he wants to experience the resurrection of the dead unto eternal life. Are these competing goals? No, they are one common prize for those who run and persevere in the race. If Christ has taken hold of us, then we should run hard to meet Him, and if Christ has been resurrected, then we too will be resurrected in Him. To gain Christ is to gain His resurrection and every other promise.



What are some ways we can work, in the power of God, to take hold of Christ and His promises?

Point 3: Run the race with victory in mind (Phil. 3:15-21).

¹⁵ Therefore, let all of us who are mature think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this also to you. ¹⁶ In any case, we should live up to whatever truth we have attained. ¹⁷ Join in imitating me, brothers and sisters, and pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For I have often told you, and now say again with tears, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame; and they are focused on earthly things, ²⁰ Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject everything to himself.

The Christian life expects the believer to grow in maturity. This is more than making the Law of Moses a checklist for obedience or the means for attaining perfection. Rather, Christian maturity involves seeing all things in the light of Jesus Christ and His cross. A mind focused on the temporary things of this world reveals immaturity, if not unbelief. But a mind focused on eternal things—our coming Savior and the resurrection He will bring with Him—reveals the maturity and health of a believer.

Glorification refers to the _____ time when a Christian reaches moral and spiritual _____ at the time of death or at Christ's return. Glorification also involves the physical perfection that we will have once our bodies have been _____.

Living with the future resurrection in view impacts our present-day lifestyle. Those who ignore the future coming of Christ fail to recognize their coming destruction in hell and so continue unabated in their sin. Believers who live with their minds set on the second coming have a vision of their future resurrection in Christ, which motivates their pursuit of that promise. In Christ, the victory has been won, so we can run the race with confidence in our completion (Phil. 1:6)



Who are some people you could imitate so as to mature in your faith?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Philippians 1:1–2:30

Paul expressed how much joy the Philippian believers' gospel partnership brought him and reminded them that their sovereign and faithful God would keep them to the end (1:3-6). He prayed that God would cause their love to increase so they would stay pure and blameless, full of the fruit of righteousness (vv. 9-11). That's what the Holy Spirit does through the gospel: He transforms us.

Therefore, this Letter to the Philippians resounds with the unyielding confidence we should have in Christ Jesus: "I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (1:6).

What does this confidence produce? "Progress and joy in the faith" (1:25).

Where does this confidence and progress come from? "It is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose" (2:13).

Paul made the point in 2:5-11 that if Jesus, who is equal with God, was willing to live selflessly to serve sinful man, even by dying for them, then how much more should we be willing to live for others rather than ourselves!



How does our confidence in Christ enable us to serve others?

Day 2: Read Philippians 3:1-11

Paul had a word he used to describe false teachers in this passage: “dogs.” Instead of companions or pets, most dogs in the ancient world were scavengers, feeding on garbage and filth, fighting among themselves. To the Jews, dogs were a despised and unclean sort of animal.

The people Paul called “dogs” preached a different gospel, one that grounded salvation not only in the work of Christ but also in Jewish rituals like circumcision (v. 2). Paul reminded his readers that nothing can save except the work of Christ and His righteousness received by faith (v. 9).

All other “works” don’t profit anything in the search for salvation. Nothing matters for acceptance with God except the righteousness of Christ. Compared to that, everything else is “dung” (v. 8).

One of the biggest mistakes people make is thinking they can go to heaven because of their good works. Instead, they need to know Christ. By knowing Christ, we are able to see through false teachers and understand the futility of human pride.



How can you communicate to others about the futility of our good works to save us?

Day 3: Read Philippians 3:12-14

Paul told the Philippian church to follow his example and press on toward the prize that is the heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Many so-called followers of Christ were living as enemies of the gospel, and so, Paul pled with his readers not to follow them. They were living for themselves and not for the glory of their Creator and the Savior.

When we lean on Christ’s power and learn from the pain of the cross, we grow closer to Christ. Suffering and affliction wean us from the affections for this world. Suffering allows us to appreciate the pain Jesus suffered for us on the cross. Therefore, suffering is an opportunity to know Christ better. Focus entirely on knowing Him and fulfilling His will for your life and you will know the greatest joy in all the world.

If you are suffering, press on toward Christ by His grace. This momentary affliction will be nothing when compared to life in eternity (Rom. 8:18).



How might you need to repent of acting like an enemy of the cross?

Day 4: Read Philippians 3:15-21

At this point, we are in the middle of Paul's letter to both members and church leaders in Philippi, seeking to warn against false teaching and promoting gospel-centered unity. Paul urged the Philippian believers to run the race and press toward the victory that is in Christ Jesus. Knowing Christ exposes reckless living within the church.

Earlier in the passage, Paul described life in Christ as running a race in which we press on toward the goal of knowing Jesus as we hope in the final victory of our glorified bodies (vv. 13-14). While Christians run this race in the world, we are citizens of heaven who eagerly wait for the return of Christ. The salvation He gives us includes a glorified body in resurrection when we're finally conformed to His image and forever freed from the temptations and sins of our sinful nature and this world (v. 21).



What are things in your life that you should leave behind as you press forward in following Christ?

Day 5: Read Philippians 4:1-23

When he wrote this letter, Paul found himself imprisoned because of his faith in Christ. Yet Paul still confidently called on the church to “rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4). He wanted believers to stand firm in the Lord no matter their circumstances. How can we do so? By remembering the way Christ lived as a humble servant who poured out His life as a sacrifice for others (2:4-8).

Paul stated that while we wait for our Savior from heaven, we should think about what is true, honorable, just, pure, and praiseworthy (4:8). Of course, we can find these things in God and His Word, but we can also find them in Jesus' followers. Whatever was good that these Christians had seen in Paul and learned from him, they should put into practice. They were to imitate his life and the lives of people like Epaphroditus and Timothy because they all sought to follow Jesus.

Paul ended his letter with heartfelt thanksgiving for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel through the years. He had learned to be content in whatever situation he found himself, but he was nonetheless grateful for the Philippians' support. And just as he had learned to trust God for his needs, he was convinced that God would in turn supply all their needs.



What do you primarily dwell on: worthy things or worthless things?

