

PRESSING ON – WITH NO LOOKING BACK!

Phil 3.12-14

INTRODUCTION

The verses we are looking at this morning revolve around three themes; and those three themes are related to three time zones – the past, the present and the future.

- Paul speaks about having *a right attitude towards the past*;
- *the right assessment of the present*;
- *and right aspirations for the future*.

So we will start where Paul begins, in verse 12, with the present. And as far as having a right assessment of the present is concerned, he declares that there is still plenty of progress to be made.

1. THE PRESENT: PLENTY OF PROGRESS TO BE MADE (vs 12-13)

He confesses that he hasn't yet arrived as a Christian. There is still a long way for him to go.

- And this assessment is in stark contrast to the one he used to have of himself, when he was relying on his own credentials and achievements to commend himself to God. Back in verse 6, he states that at one time he considered himself *faultless* as far as keeping God's laws were concerned.
- But now he has come to realise that he still has a very long way to go before he becomes all that God designed him to be.
- Self-assessments are usually false assessments because we will tend to paint ourselves in an over-optimistic light.
- *Who can discern his own errors? Forgive my hidden faults*, David prays in Psalm 19.12. It's very difficult for us to discern our hidden faults because, by their very nature, they are ones we are not aware of! That's why we need to expose ourselves to the Scriptures regularly, if we are to come to a right assessment of ourselves – if we are to see ourselves as God sees us. James tells us that the Bible is like a mirror, because it shows us things about ourselves that we wouldn't be able to see in any other way (James 1.21-25). We can't tell whether our face is clean or dirty without checking it out in a mirror. And similarly, we can't tell whether our lives are clean or dirty in God's sight without holding them up to the scrutiny of the Scriptures.
- *Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent*, James tells us. And how do we do that? By *humbly accepting the word planted in you, which can save you*, he goes on to write. And having looked in the mirror that is God's Word, James urges us, *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*
- When we look at ourselves in the light of God's Word, we realise how far short we fall of God's ideal for our lives.
- Paul makes three statements about his present life, in verses 12 and 13.

First he tells us that

1.1 "I haven't already obtained all this" (v12)

It's not clear at first sight what the '*all this*' is referring to.

- In verses 7 and 8, he has described how he had written off all those things that he once considered assets in his life – all his human credentials and achievements (vs 4-6), all the things he had been relying on to commend himself to God. Because he had come to realise that they were, in fact, liabilities - a total *loss* - so long as he was trusting in them to secure his acceptance by God (vs 7-8).
- But what he had *gained* by writing these things off was *Christ* (vs 7-8)!

- And with the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour, he had now acquired *a right standing with God* that was a gift from God – a gift freely given to all those who trust themselves unreservedly to Jesus Christ (v9). So Paul knew he had *obtained* salvation; his acceptance by God and his place in heaven were assured.
 - Furthermore, with Christ as his Lord and saviour, Paul had acquired a new dynamic for living – the power of Christ’s resurrection life flowing within him, from the presence of God’s Spirit that had been gifted to him as well (v10).
 - But best of all, Paul could speak of the *surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord* (v8) – the amazing privilege of knowing the Son of God, no less, as a living person in his daily experience.
 - These were some of the things that Paul had already obtained. So what was it that he was still waiting for? Well, there are two possibilities.
- (a) **Resurrection.** At the end of verse 11, Paul has spoken about his future resurrection; and though this was assured, he hadn’t yet experienced it, because he hadn’t yet died!
- (b) **Sanctification.** But he has also spoken about *becoming like Jesus in his death*. And when we looked at that phrase last week, we saw that it referred not to the manner of Christ’s death (which was by crucifixion), but to the spirit in which Jesus faced death – totally dedicated to his Father’s will. This is what Paul hadn’t already obtained – the kind of total dedication to God that was seen in Jesus.

You see, Paul goes on to say next,

1.2 “I haven’t already been made perfect”

We measure perfection in relation to Jesus – not against any other scale of human achievement. And in comparison to Jesus, none of us can ever claim to have ‘arrived’ spiritually, at a complete state of sanctification – totally dedicated, in practise (not just in theory) to the father’s will, in every part of our being. And this, if for no other reason than that the Father has yet revealed the fullness of his will to us for our lives. It’s something he unfolds to us, little by little, day by day, and month by month. And so perfection is something we won’t attain until our arrival in heaven.

- You will have noticed that Paul speaks about us *being made perfect*, not about us making ourselves perfect. Our perfection (our finished state) is as much a gift to us from God as everything else about our salvation. And, though it’s assured, it’s still in the future.
- *Even now, your true is hidden with Christ in God*, Paul tells us in Col 3.3. It’s safe in heaven’s bank; and *when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory!* What a fantastic prospect that is for us!
- *Dear friends, we are already children of God*, John writes in his first letter (1 John 3.2); but *what we shall be has not yet been made fully known* to us. *But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.* An amazing prospect!!

So this is why in verses 12b-13a, Paul says,

1.3 “I haven’t yet taken full possession” of everything for which Christ has taken hold of me.

There are two important truths highlighted in these phrases at the end of verse 12 and the beginning of verse 13. First, Paul makes it clear here that

(a) **Becoming a Christian is about Christ taking hold of us.** Very often, we speak of becoming a Christian in terms of us taking hold of Christ – receiving him as our Saviour, or committing ourselves to him as our Lord. And that’s the same it looks from our human perspective. But behind our human faith lies a divine initiative. In Eph 1.3, Paul speaks about *God having chosen us to be holy and blameless in his sight - before the creation of the world* – through our union with Christ. So the moment of our conversion is as much the moment when Christ takes hold of us, as it is of us taking hold of him! In fact, we only take hold of him (by faith) because in his great love and mercy, he reaches down to take hold of us.

- **Illustration.** Jesus is like the winch man of an air-sea rescue helicopter crew, being lowered down to our level to snatch us to safety - to rescue us from the consequences of our sin and guilt. It’s why we owe our eternal destiny to him, and to him absolutely. Without him, we would all perish. Without his

initiative in coming to our rescue, we would all be doomed. It's why we sing the song in our books, *I am not mine own, I've been bought with a price; precious blood of Christ. I am not mine own. So how could I ever say, "I will choose another way", knowing the price that's paid, precious blood of Christ.* Becoming a Christian is about Christ taking hold of us, for now and for all of eternity.

- This is why, in John 6.44, Jesus says, *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws that person to me.* The initiative for our salvation belongs to God. And this is also why Jesus is able to say (John 6.37), *whoever comes to me I will never drive away, for all that the Father gives me will come to me.* Those who come to Jesus are those he has already reached out to, to take hold of for himself.
- *You did not choose me; I chose you,* Jesus told his disciples in John 15.16. This is the wonder of our salvation: undeserving as we are, Jesus reaches down to take hold of us, for all of eternity. And

(b) Christ takes hold of us for a purpose, Paul tells us in these verses (v12,13). He doesn't define what it is exactly that Christ takes hold of us for, because his purpose is so multi-faceted.

- Christ takes hold of us for heaven, as we have already said. *"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory,* Jesus prayed in John 17.24.
- Meanwhile, Jesus takes hold of us for fruitfulness here on earth, in terms of the good deeds we can do, especially winning other people to him. *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last,* Jesus explained in John 15.14. *We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Eph 2.10).
- Christ took hold of us so that we could enjoy fellowship with him. *I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you* (John 15.15). *"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me -just as the Father knows me and I know the Father* (John 10.14-15).
- Most especially, Jesus has taken hold of us so that he can transform us to be like him in all his perfection and glory, Paul tells us in Romans 8.28-29. *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.* Jesus took hold of us for glory - what a thought!!

And so as far as the present is concerned, Paul says, there's progress still to be made. Then as far as the past is concerned, Paul tells us that there are aspects of the past to be left behind.

2. THE PAST: ASPECTS TO BE LEFT BEHIND (v13a)

One thing, he writes – *I forget what's behind* me in my life. You see, if progress is to be made in the present and in the future, we need to let go of our past – as Paul had done – otherwise it can act like a ball and chain around our ankle, impeding our progress. But what is it about our past that we must *forget*?

- We know there are many benefits in looking back over our life. The Israelites were constantly being encouraged to remember the great things God had done for them in the past, to keep them loyal to him in the present and focussed on him for their future. There are important lessons for us all to learn from our pasts. Someone once quipped, "Those who fail to learn from their mistakes of the past are bound to repeat them" – and that's often true, for churches as well as for individuals. It's good to look back with thanksgiving, for God's provision and guidance for us, as we did recently at our Church Anniversary Weekend.
- But there are very real dangers in dwelling on the past. And there are most definitely some aspects of the past that we do well to forget. Let me mention three.

(a) regrets. Things we know we shouldn't have done, or things we should have done but failed to do. We could call them our past mistakes and wasted opportunities.

- *"I wish I had worked harder at school"* many will say after they have left school. *"If only I had brought up my children differently, perhaps they would be going on with the Lord now,"* many a bewildered parent will say.

- It's all too easy for any of us to dwell on past failing with an "if only" kind of attitude, that paralyses us from achieving anything worthwhile in the present. We are too loaded down with despair and guilt.
- So we have to come to terms with the fact that we cannot turn the clock back and start all over again. We can't change our past decisions. What we have done – or what we failed to do – remains the same, however deep our regrets.
- But one of the greatest blessings of being a Christian is that we know Christ has forgiven our past mistakes and wasted opportunities. And he has not only saved us from our past; he has saved us for his future.
- But we will never be able to take hold of that future, until we have let go of our past regrets.

Here's something else we need to let go of from our past. Any feelings of

(b) Bitterness towards other people. Regrets arise over the wrong things we have done; but bitterness arises from wrong things that have been done to us, by other people. And unless we cut ourselves free from such feelings of bitterness toward other people, the bitterness will gnaw away at our personality, destroying it, just like cancerous cells in our bodies. The cancerous cells have to be cut out and totally removed, or else they will sour our spirituality and mar our Christlikeness.

- Hebrews 11.25 tells us that harbouring bitterness from the past has three very unpleasant results. It *defiles other people, causes trouble, - and worst of all – causes us to miss out on God's grace*, all the potential blessings that he wants to pour into our lives (Cf Gen 27.21 re Esau).
- We need to learn how to forgive those who have wronged us, as well as forgive ourselves for our past errors.
- It's often very hard to get rid of every trace of bitterness from our lives, especially if the wrongs done to us have been grievous, and have caused us a lot of pain. It's tempting to feel sorry for ourselves, and wallow in a lake self-pity. It's the victim syndrome that we have to avoid, because it will hold back our usefulness to the Lord, by spoiling the spirit in which we would serve him.
- Joseph had to learn to hold no grudges against his brothers, despite the terrible crime they had committed against him. Interestingly, it was something they feared, until he reassured them that their fears were unfounded. In Genesis 50.15, 19-20, we read *When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"... But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. That's the position of faith we can adopt if we hold fast to Romans 8.28. We know that in all things including the wrongs done to us - God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* And of course, Jesus himself is the supreme example of this truth – God working for his good, even through the cross.
- In every church I have pastored, I have had to learn to let go of those who have wronged me, and not to bear grudges against them. It has often been very hard, and has sometimes taken years rather than days or months. But I have come to learn that it's the only way forward in our service to Christ.
- We are all familiar with the command to 'love our neighbour as ourselves'. It's a verse Jesus quoted from the Old Testament. But few of us could probably recite the first half of the verse. It reads like this (Lev 19.18). *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.* Loving our neighbour demands we bear no grudges against anyone, nor harbour any secret bitterness towards anyone. We need to learn to forgive others in the same way that God has forgiven us (Eph 4.32). When God forgives us, he chooses to remember our sin no more.

There's a third aspect of the past we need to forget. We can label it

(c) Nostalgia – a hankering after 'the good old days', which, of course, have gone forever, never to return. We can't turn the clock back, let alone bring the past back. Nostalgia manifest itself in tell-tale phrases like "In my day ..."; or "When I was your age ..."; "I can remember when we used to ...". Phrases like that ought to be banned from church life – because they have the potential of being discouraging to those working hard for the Lord in the present.

- We read in Ezra 3.12-13, that when the foundation stone for the new temple was laid in Jerusalem after the exiles return from Babylon, *many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise.* What were the older people weeping about? Was it nostalgia, a feeling that things had been better in the past? That seems to be the implication from Haggai 2.2-3. God had to say to his people through his prophet, *“Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’”* But then God says (v9), *‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house.’* The people had got it wrong in being so nostalgic about the past. The future would be better in God’s providence – if only they could see it.
- Around the same time, a young man went around Jerusalem measuring the course of the old city walls. But he is rebuked for doing so (Zech 2.1-4). *Tell that young man, ‘Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of people in it.’* God isn’t limited by what he has done in the past. “We mustn’t allow bygone glories or past failures to decide the dimensions of the future”, Alex Motyer writes (p176).
- *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Even now, it is springing up; do you not perceive it?* The tragedy of dwelling on the past is that we may miss what God is doing in the present, because our eyes are looking in the wrong direction. The antidote to nostalgia is to have our sights firmly fixed on God’s future.

And that’s where Paul takes us in verse 13b-14. Paul’s attitude to the future is as positive as it could be. He speaks about pressing on until we reach our goal.

3. THE FUTURE: PRESSING ON TO REACH OUR GOAL (vs 13b-14)

Notice the strength of the words Paul uses here.

- The word translated *press on* in verses 12 and 14 is a hunting term. It means to go in pursuit of something until you have captured. It is the word used of Paul when he was hounding Christians to their death. So on becoming a Christian, all that misplaced zeal wasn’t eliminated from Paul’s personality. It was redirected to its proper ends.
- And the word translated *straining towards* in verse 13 is an athletic term, used to describe a runner flexing every sinew and muscle of his body to go flat out towards the finishing line. That was the attitude Paul had towards the future God had set before him.
- He speaks about *winning the prize for which God called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.* We know that our salvation is a gift of God’s grace. So when the text speaks of Paul ‘winning’ the prize, it isn’t suggesting that our place in heaven is something we earn through our own efforts. The word ‘sin’ doesn’t occur in Paul’s Greek at all, in fact, so the NIV has been rather naughty to slip it in. What Paul says literally is this. I’m pursuing the goal, which will result in my prize.
- And what exactly is that prize? Well, as with the things for which Christ has taken hold of us, Paul doesn’t spell it out because it is so multifaceted.
 - It includes our place in heaven, which we will enjoy with all of God’s people from every generation and geographical location.
 - It includes our new resurrection body, which Paul will describe at the end of this chapter (3.20-21).
 - Best of all, it will include coming face to face with Jesus, and being with him forever – something better than anything this life can offer us (1.23).
- And because this prize is so great, Paul knows of no letting up in his pursuit of it.
 - It’s a goal that calls for real determination on our part (Heb 12.1-3). *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. 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

- It's a goal that calls for single-mindedness, too (1 Cor 9.24). *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*
- It's a goal that calls for great self-discipline (1 Cor 9.25-27). *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*
- It's a goal that calls for perseverance, until the race is won (Acts 20.23-24). *I know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. 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.*

Paul was determined to follow the course marked out for him by Christ, until he reached his goal, and received his prize – Jesus himself. “His whole life was a passionate pursuit of Christ,” someone has observed. And so at the end of his life, Paul was able to write (2 Tim 4.6-8), *The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him (James 1.12).