

Pressing On When You Want to Stop

Philippians 3:12-21 (NIV)

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained. ¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Last week, we were confronted with the fact that we're often not the perfect child. Yet God still says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) He doesn't soften this demand and say, "Try to be perfect." He doesn't qualify his statement saying that he knows that we can't actually be perfect or that he'll take right actions over right words or right desires or vice versa. He actually demands perfection. And we try, but we fail. And that hurts. So, why bother? Why try to be the perfect child? Why not just give up?

When your health continues to deteriorate even when you do all the right things, when the pain persists and no medication, no therapy, no stress reduction lessens it, depression sets in and you ask the question, "Why am I here? It seems rather pointless to keep going when it all hurts." If some of you looked at the Bible study I wrote for pastors' conference a week ago, maybe relate to that dysphoria, that bad feeling like your mind and your body is at odds with each other, that every interaction you have is a lie as your biological sex and your perceived gender are not lining up. Add on top of these things that it looks like everyone else is fine. They don't look like they're struggling to find a reason to live, to keep on going. They have friends. They have family who support them and care about them. What about me? Where do I belong? What's my purpose? Why should I keep going? Because, honestly, I just want the pain to end, and I can't make this life perfect. Why should I keep pressing on?

If that's your struggle, you're not alone. The Apostle Paul had to answer those questions for himself. For a large part of his life, he knew his purpose. It was to zealously follow God and his laws, which meant getting rid of people who were trying to change them, get rid of all these people following Jesus. Then God changed the whole purpose of his life, appearing to him while Paul was traveling to go arrest more of these Jesus followers. Paul gave up his old life of striving to earn God's favor by his obedience to God's laws. Just a few verses before our selected verses today, Paul shared that he now considered that old life, what he once was, what he once lived for, all garbage. Paul had a new life in telling people that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's Word, of his commands, that he kept it all for us and brought us a righteousness not by our obedience, but by his. He made us right with God through faith.

Yet, as Paul proclaimed this good news of Jesus Christ substituting his life for ours, Paul was mocked, imprisoned, whipped, flogged, hit with stones, shipwrecked, and generally hated. This new life brought with it more pain than he had experienced previously. He had to answer the question, "Why keep going? Why press on if this is what I am going to get, suffering for doing the right thing?"

Yes, the Bible, God's Word, is a book about suffering, but it is not a book about meaningless and pointless suffering. God gives us a narrative of hope, meaning that he gives us a sure and certain future that we can count on. He gives us reasons to press on, reasons that Paul is sharing with us. He wrote, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." (verse 12)

What is that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me? Just 3 verses earlier Paul explains that it is perfection that Christ Jesus took hold of and gave to him. It is a righteousness not based on his striving, not on his efforts, not how well he keeps God's laws, not how put together he looks, not the lack of depression, or sense of belonging that he has created. No, perfection, righteousness, was all done by Christ for us, how he humbled himself by taking on the very nature of a servant. He lived the expectation, that demand, of God to be perfect as God is perfect. After living that, he also became obedient to death – even death on a cross. This is where he paid for all the sins of all people for all time, including all of Paul's. This righteousness is given to people by faith, a gift given by the Holy Spirit. God took hold of Paul, brought him to believe Christ had done everything for him, and so covered him with Jesus' perfection.

We have been given the same righteousness, the same perfection, by faith from God. He planted it in our hearts and caused us to believe it when we heard all that Jesus did for us. He gave this to us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, through baptism. There, he removed all our sins from our record because he paid the price for all of them – and not just the past sins, but the present sins that are on your mind and all the future sins that you and I will commit, all the ways that we are not perfect. We're not only cleansed of our sins, of all the ways we want to give up on doing what is good, but we are also covered in Jesus' righteousness, his perfection, just like Paul. We have been made children of God on the basis of what Jesus did for us.

That's what we have right now, and it affects our future. It gives us something great to look forward to. "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (verses 20-21)

Because we belong to God and because Christ was raised from the dead and his body glorified, made perfect, made immortal, then we look forward to God doing the same thing for us and our bodies. This is what Paul looked forward to, why he kept pressing on to live by God's commands. He knew that he was already right with God, covered with his perfection, even though he still sinned. But because Christ had already taken hold of for him, Paul pressed on with the confidence that one day all the pains of this sinful world, all the imperfections, would end. Paul knew that his life was not without meaning or purpose. His purpose was found in living out the perfection and belonging and love that Christ already taken hold of for him.

God holds out this same life, same purpose, for us. Because Christ has already taken a hold of perfection for us, then our body which is failing and hurting and we're not happy with will in the future be renewed, made immortal, imperishable. The depression and dark thoughts wishing the pain to end will be resolved because the pain will end. The dysphoria of thinking maybe you're in the wrong body, the fixation of all the imperfections of your body, will end as at the resurrection from the dead God will perfect your body. The alone feeling, the feeling of being out of place, this will one day be completely done away with as you do right now and will always belong to God and all other believers in completely perfect relationships.

This is why we, like Paul, keep pressing on, as he wrote: "Only let us live up to what we have already attained." (verse 16) We already have it! We are already right with God. We are covered with Jesus' perfection by faith. We belong to God. Our bodies will be transformed. We have a perfect life that we will fully realize on the Last Day when Jesus returns.

Knowing that Christ has taken hold of us, we have reason to press on, like Paul did. "Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (verses 13-14)

It was painful for Paul to realize that a good portion of his life was lived focusing on the wrong things, focusing on how he could earn a place with God by what he did. In doing so, he had sinned even more. But because Christ took hold of him, all that was in the past. God had forgiven him, removed his sins from him as far as the east is from the west. He was not his imperfections. He was right with God because of Christ's perfect life, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection from the dead.

We follow Paul's example. We stop looking at the temporary things of this life to give us lasting value, meaning, and purpose. They aren't perfect, and they will ultimately not satisfy and will make you think that living for God is pointlessly painful. Instead, we look to how Christ took hold of us by faith. We look at how he already satisfied God's demand for perfection as well as the payment for all our sins. When we stop looking at our pain and our sin and instead look ahead to Christ, we see who we are, that we are loved, covered with Christ's perfection, that we belong to God and have a perfect painless future coming.

Until that day when Christ returns and transforms our lowly bodies to be like his glorious, perfect body, we keep going. We press on toward what God has already won for us. God has given us a narrative of hope: a sure and certain future of perfection as bought and paid for by Christ for us. Since God has taken hold of us and will keep his promise, we have reasons to keep going. We press on. Amen.