

Pressing On

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 16th of January 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Pressing On and is based on Philippians 3, verses 12-21.

Heavenly Father, you've caused all Holy Scripture to be written to make us wise for salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, to train us in righteousness, to rebuke and correct us, so that we may stand on that final day in your presence, clothed in his righteousness.

So we pray, Lord God, that you will take your word now, write it in our hearts by your Spirit, so that Jesus may be glorified in all we do and think and say.

Amen. One of the prestige events of any Olympics is the 100 metres sprint. It's not particularly my favourite event, but my favourite angle for watching the event is when, inevitably on the television, they show you the runners running straight towards you, and even better, in slow motion.

I remember a few years ago, I think it was Linford Christie winning the 92 Olympics, and they had the slow motion replay as he ran towards the camera looking straight down his lane, down the 100 metres straight.

[1 : 2 8] And he was a model of intensity and concentration and determination. There was no distraction. He didn't run halfway and then stop and wave to the crowd and spot his friends and family and look around the other runners.

He was just eyes fixed straight ahead, wide-eyed, looking for the finishing line. Intense, determined, focused, single-minded.

There was no distraction. And every ounce of energy in that very muscular body was straining and striving to be first over the finishing line, as he was on that occasion.

Only then, as he breasted the tape, so to speak, he looked around and saw that he'd won and the other runners were behind him, etc. That's the sort of illustration that Paul has in mind in the language that he uses at the beginning of today's reading about the Christian life and the determination and single-minded purpose and focus that any Christian ought to have in their life on earth, straining and striving for the finishing line, that is, our arrival finally in heaven, in God's heavenly presence.

Paul has already said at the end of what we saw last week in verse 9 and 10 that his desire is to be found in Christ. That's his goal. The goal of his earthly life is that the finishing tape is to be found in Jesus Christ at the end of his life.

[2 : 5 9] Not having a righteousness of his own, but one that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

I want to know Christ, he says, and the power of his resurrection. That is, Paul is longing and looking forward with single-minded purpose and determination to the day when he will rise from the dead to the glorious and eternal presence of God.

That's his goal. That's what he's striving for in these verses. As he describes the same thing in verse 14, he says, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

He calls there heaven a prize, not something that we earn so much as rather the victor's spoils that await us at the end of our life. This striving for the finishing tape is not a competition, unlike the Olympics.

It's not first over the line, but it's any who finish. And Paul is urging every Christian to whom he's writing at Philippi to strive to make the finishing line, to receive the prize, that is, to be part of the heavenly presence of God, to be found in Christ, to achieve or receive that righteousness of Christ, not our own righteousness on that final day.

[4 : 28] Now, perhaps in countering some false teaching around at Philippi, maybe to counter some wrong perceptions, Paul makes it clear that that is not yet his own. He's not yet become perfect, Christ-like in every way.

Rather, as he says at the beginning of verse 12, not that I've already obtained this or have already reached the goal. To make it doubly clear, he says again at the beginning of verse 13, I do not consider that I've made it my own.

But both times, verses 12 and 13, where he says, I've not yet attained this, it's not yet my own, he goes on to make clear that he is striving with determination to finish.

So verse 12 finishes, I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Verse 13 continues, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

I press on, he says. I press on. The language suggests the person who is straining for the finishing tape, thrusting out their chest to be first over the line.

[5 : 41] I press on, he says. The language is full of effort, determination, full of energy, pressing on in hot pursuit with dogged determination.

He will not be distracted, he will not give up, he will not sit by the wayside, but will press on determinedly for the finishing line of receiving the heavenly prize.

the language is of supreme human effort and energy and relentless perseverance in the Christian race. I press on.

It's a present tense, a continuous tense. So it's not just today I'll press on but the rest of the week I'll put my feet up. But it's every day, hour by hour, minute by minute, day by day, week by week, I press on.

I will keep pressing on for the rest of my earthly life till I receive that heavenly prize of full salvation in Christ. At the beginning of the Christian life, there is a heavenly call.

[6 : 44] Paul, I guess, experienced that on the road to Damascus where he was not only converted but called then to a ministry of the Christian gospel. For every Christian, in a sense, our Christian life begins with a heavenly call.

We're on earth, we're brought to faith and from heaven there is a call that heaven is our ultimate destiny and destination. The heavenly call is not the final prize but the heavenly call is the beginning of the Christian life as Paul calls it in verse 14 but it has its prize, heaven itself and that's where our goal, our finishing line is.

I press on, he says, toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Paul though is not simply commending human effort although he's giving us a very clear example of human effort to receive that heavenly prize to finish well.

He's made it clear that the heavenly call is in Christ. He makes it clear in verse 12 that he presses on to make it his own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

The language literally is I press on to seize this prize because Christ Jesus has seized me. So all the human effort that Paul is commending here and there is much in response to and reliant on Christ seizing him.

[8 : 14] Christ making him his own. That is, our final arrival in heaven and receipt of the heavenly prize is not in the end due to our effort but to God's grace in seizing us and making us one of his making himself known to us.

But that grace that we receive as Christians does not abrogate our responsibility to expend all our effort with single-minded purpose and focus to pursue the heavenly prize.

God's grace is free and merciful but it's not cheap and too often it seems to me this balance of grace and effort we tip one side or the other rather than hold them in a biblical balance.

We either think our Christian life is all our own works and doing and if we finally arrive in heaven it's our achievement on which we could boast or other we overstate the grace and think well God saved me I can sit back put my feet up and relax but grace brings with it the demands of effort supreme human effort to strive for the finishing line.

It's one thing to begin but the actual goal is finishing and finishing well in faith. This forward looking heavenly looking upward looking focus that Paul is commending in these verses is not something that in modern Christian faith and teaching and songs and hymns is quite as dominant it seems to me as used to be in previous generations.

[9 : 50] Christian concerns I think by and large tend to be much more this worldly than perhaps the Bible allows us to be and perhaps previous generations of Christians were.

See in contrast to the runner who's focused on the finishing tape and not distracted by what's around so many Christians are totally absorbed by daily living.

We're looking around being distracted and tempted by the world's allures. All sorts of Turkish delights get in our way and lead us off the path. Or perhaps instead of looking forwards we spend our Christian life actually looking backwards with our back to the finishing tape.

We may be looking backwards with regret and guilt at things that we've done wrong or have been wronged against us in the past. There are many Christians, many people who live like that. Their eyes are back in the past full of regret and sorrow, bitterness or anger.

Or an alternative in looking back is that we look back to the glory days. Those great days of our Christian zeal and youth. The great days of packed churches and revivals and so on.

[11 : 01] Paul says forgetting what lies past whether good or bad our focus is to be forward on the finishing line, our focus is to be upward for that's where the finishing line is at heaven's doors.

We ought to keep looking ahead, we ought to keep looking up, we ought to keep holding fast. Whatever perhaps differences there might be in a Christian congregation, Paul is making it clear that holding fast and finishing well is preeminent amongst our concerns.

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind if you think differently about anything this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. The other day I heard some form of quiz, I can't remember where I heard it on the radio or something in the car I guess and it was one of those who am I type things and the first question was I'm a Victorian and instantly somebody answered Shane Warne.

Nobody else in Victoria seems to matter, Shane Warne is it. And when I was at the Tsunami Appeal cricket match on Monday, the biggest cheers were for Shane Warne. Well, he is a successful bowler, he's a great role model.

Fifteen years ago leg spin was a dying art. These days there are leg spinners all over the place apparently. I'm not sure that I could ever tell the difference but that's what I'm told. But of course Shane Warne isn't a totally good model either because as even those with fleeting interest in cricket will know, there are various things that he's done that perhaps he ought not to have done in recent times.

[12 : 39] Lewd phone calls, drugs, whatever. A good role model but also a bad role model. Very influential role model. So he's influenced lots of people to take up leg spin but no doubt in his own standards of morality, at least in what's been portrayed in the media, a role model that perhaps is not the best.

Role models are influential and in church life, Christian life, that is also the case. For the church in Philippi there were competing role models in effect, competing examples for people to follow.

There were some there, perhaps they were teaching more or less the truth, it seems to be their life rather than their teaching that Paul is attacking in the verses that follow here but they are not to be ones.

to follow. He says in verse 18, for many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. It seems the way he expresses that many live as enemies rather than teach something against the cross, that it's their behaviour that denies the cross of Jesus.

Presumably that means that in their sinful behaviour they are enemies of the cross because they're not putting aside their sin, acknowledging that Jesus died for their forgiveness and for their righteousness.

[13 : 55] And so they live in effect as pagan lives even though it seems these are people who are claiming some form of Christian faith. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ, I've often told you of them, now I tell you even with tears their end is destruction.

They're described then in verse 19 in three ways, fairly graphic terms, their God is the belly, Paul says in verse 19.

He may be suggesting that they're characterised by gluttony, that they're stuffing themselves full of food and luxuries and wine and so on. Certainly it implies that they're indulgent, maybe greedy, they're certainly pandering to themselves, maybe it's their physical appetite that is driving their lives here.

They're living for today, they're living for themselves. Such people, Paul says, who are around you in Philippi, on whom you may well be wanting to model your lives, they are enemies of the cross.

Secondly, and again graphically, he says they glory in their shame. Not that they're actually boasting deliberately that they're doing shameful things, but the things they are doing they ought to be ashamed of, instead they're boasting of them.

[15 : 11] So it's not just that they're being indulgent or greedy or gluttonous, but they're actually boasting in that, they're boasting in their pandering to themselves, in their luxurious lifestyle, whatever it is, that's the detail behind it.

That is, they've got a distortion of moral values. They're not only doing what is wrong and evil, but they're boasting in what is wrong and evil as though what is evil is in fact good, and that what is good is in fact evil.

Well, that's actually the path of sin, that we pursue a path of sin and we end up being so confused that we think good is evil and evil is good. Isaiah the prophet attacked Israel of his day for that very thing they call good evil and evil good.

Paul in Romans 1 says much the same. The third description is that their minds are set on earthly things at the end of verse 19. Their focus is on the world.

It's on their dinner table. It's on their wine cask or whatever it is. It's on their luxuries. It's on their daily living. Living for themselves, living for today. That's where their focus is. That's where their minds are set.

[16 : 20] Paul is making it clear in this passage as he thinks about focusing on the finishing line, directing our attention and energy and effort to that, to the heavenly prize, that our minds must be set on heaven, not earth.

Our minds must be set on the finishing line. And as you see Linford Christie or other runners putting in all that effort to finish, you can see that's where their minds are. When Linford Christie's running and you've got the slow motion replay of him running towards you on camera, eyes wide open, it's the finishing line where his mind is set.

He's not thinking about his next meal. He's not thinking about his wife or his girlfriend or his children or whatever. He's thinking about the end, the finish. And Paul is saying that to the Philippian Christians, around them, maybe even under the guise of being Christian, there are people who are just living for today.

They're living for themselves. They're living for their belly. Their mind is set on earth. Don't follow their example. While our church is a little different from Philippi, all around us there are people in our society, pagans and Christians whose lives are just living for today, full of indulgence and wealth and luxury and complacency.

The finishing line is far out of sight for them. They're not looking towards it at all. In contrast, Paul says imitate me. Verse 17. Join in imitating me.

[17 : 44] Not that Paul is claiming to be perfect here. He's not saying that every single thing that he does or says or thinks is right. But when he says imitate me in this passage, he has one thing in mind.

Imitate my focus on the finishing line. That is, set your minds like him on the heavenly prize, not on worldly things.

Follow the right role model, in effect, is what he's saying. Ancient Philippi was a significant town in northern Greece, not all that far really from the Turkish border today, a few hours drive, in a valley on the Via Ignatius, a major Roman road of the Roman Empire.

Unusually perhaps for a city like that, at that sort of location, it was a Roman colony. The issue of that stems back to a famous battle fort a hundred years or so before Paul was in Philippi.

Because it was a Roman colony, those residents of Philippi who were Roman citizens had their names recorded on the register of citizens held in Rome, the capital of the Empire.

[18 : 58] Paul uses that analogy, so appropriate and applicable for Philippi, in his next verse to describe Christians. Their citizenship is in heaven, he says.

That is implying that for Christians in Philippi on earth, their names are recorded in the registry of citizens in heaven. That's where they belong. Now, that truth doesn't just apply to the Philippians.

It's true of all Christians. We belong in heaven. If we're Christians and trusting in Jesus, our names are recorded in heaven. That's our home. It's where we belong.

It's an added reason, you see, for focusing on heaven in our life on earth. It's not that heaven is something foreign to us. It's our home. That's where our citizenship lies.

That's where we belong. So living on earth is temporary. Heaven, our home, is our eternal destination. So we ought to live on earth with our minds set in heaven.

[20 : 01] A bit like people who are immigrants to Australia, but their minds are fixed back in the old country, whatever that old country is. My grandfather is almost 97. He came to Australia in the 1930s.

He's lived here basically for 65 years or something like that. England, in his mind, is still home. After all those years, home is what he calls it.

Now, it's a sense in which for Christians, no matter how long we live on earth, we're to be like that with heaven being our home. That's our focus. That's our pursuit here on earth, following Paul's example.

It's our focus. It's our prize. Paul goes on in verse 20 to say, our citizenship is in heaven and it is from there that we're expecting a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He'll transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Paul is not claiming to be perfect in this life here on earth.

[21 : 06] He knows that's impossible. But he is awaiting that finishing tape when Jesus will come again from heaven to transform his earthly body to make it fit for heaven.

That's also our destiny if we're Christian people, that transformation by Jesus through the power of the resurrection. Genuine Christianity lives with heaven as its focus and it lives with the hope of the return of Jesus.

Often not to the fore of Christian thinking and teaching these days, it seems to me. I suspect one reason for that is that when we live in a comfortable age, a fairly affluent age, where really everything we need is on tap more or less.

An age of relative ease in world history, it's all too easy to become complacent, to be satisfied in this life and not to be looking for and longing for heaven and Jesus' return.

Affluent complacency is crippling for Christian faith. It seems to me the longing of heaven that the Bible commends to us, we find much more readily in Christian communities in the third world, in Africa and Asia and other places.

[22 : 25] We find it more readily in societies that are struggling or persecuted than we do in our comfortable Western world. We have to work hard to remember that for all the ease and comfort of our world here, it's fleeting, it's temporary, it's not our goal, it's not our home.

Ours is to be a life of focus on the end, the finishing tape, full of hope of the return of Jesus. Three things to conclude about this hope. Christian hope, firstly, has deep ethical implications.

Paul acknowledges as much here, we see it in the pages of the New Testament frequently, that as we look forward with real hope for Jesus' return and our arrival in heaven, then it will transform us even now to become more like Christ for that day.

And that's in effect the argument that Paul's been running through in these chapters, especially with the issue of humility, that as we are looking forward with real hope to Jesus' return and our arrival in heaven, it will change us ethically and morally here and now on earth.

Heavenly mindedness is full of earthly change and reality for us. Secondly, Christian hope is to be confident and determined.

[23 : 40] We've seen that in Paul's example here. He is full of determination and confidence that the finishing tape he will cross one day. Not because he's confident in his own effort, but he's confident that Christ has seized him already.

His pursuit of heaven is not something that is fearful or lacking in confidence. He's not uncertain of arriving at the finishing tape, but his certainty doesn't in any way take away the effort and determination of striving for that finishing tape.

Thirdly and finally, this Christian hope is not abstract. It's not some pie in the sky when you die wishful thinking that I hear often when I take funerals of people or in families where there are few Christians, if any.

Oh, well, we're sort of hoping that he's in a place that's better. That's abstract wishful thinking. It's not Christian hope. But Christian hope is personal. It is Jesus Christ.

The finishing line is Jesus Christ. The return of him, our arrival at his place in heaven. Jesus is our hope and stay.

[24 : 50] All our hope on him is founded. When the last trumpet voice shall sound, oh, may I then in him be found, clothed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before his throne.

Let's pray. God, our Father, we pray that by the power of your spirit you will strengthen us to run the race before us, strong and brave to face the foe, looking only unto Jesus as we onward go.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Amen.