

the end we pursue

Well, as it says in the bulletin, today we return to our study in Paul's letter to the Philippians. We've got three Sundays left in this great letter – and I'm so glad to be back in Philippians – in each of these passages. Because they speak so personally and poignantly to the stuff of our lives.

It is stunning how a letter written almost 2000 years ago can feel **so current** – **so needed** – **so alive** today.

Though it shouldn't surprise us, since the Spirit who inspired Paul in the writing of this letter is the same Holy Spirit who is seeking to lead us to Christ today.

So, if you have a Bible with you, open it with me to **Philippians 3:12-4:1**.

Phil 3:12-4:1.

Now, it's worth noting that we're re-entering Philippians **midway** this morning... *Well* into the letter, in fact. Prior to our month-long break, we had already been in Philippians for **7 weeks**.

Which means that we probably **need** to **recall** a bit of the **context** of this letter, if we are to make sense of what Paul is on about here *in the middle of* chapter 3.

And our first verse makes the point. **Phil 3:12**, begins, "*Not that I have already obtained **all this**...*" Which assumes we've read the previous text where Paul explains what **all this** refers to...

So, we'll actually start our reading today in **v.10** – just to help us with the immediate context.

But bigger than that, it's also important that we remember a few things about the Philippians and Paul's writing to them.

The **first** simply being that these were a people that Paul knew and **loved deeply**. This letter is full of affection and deep personal care – which shows up in our passage today. And this was the case because Paul founded this church about a decade prior – and so, in the years since, Paul had carried these people and this church community in his heart. He cared deeply about what was going on among them and where it all was leading. *Paul loved the Philippian Christians and this letter flows out of this love...*

Second, it's important to remember something of the **context** in which **they** lived – the Philippians, that is. That their city – Philippi – had the honor of being an official "**colony of Rome**".

Which meant, as we talked about before, that life in Philippi was shaped and defined by the values of Rome... *Philippi was a little Rome.*

Life in Philippi functioned just like it did in Rome, and the Philippians were proud citizens of Rome – proudly **loyal** to Rome and **her Emperor** – Caesar.

In truth, by this point in history, the cult of the Emperor had developed – and Caesar was spoken of and worshipped as **Lord** and **Saviour**, the Divine **Son of God**.

These titles were explicitly and exclusively used to speak of Caesar (as the coins of ancient Rome attest).

So this was the context in which the Philippian Christians found themselves *seeking to follow Jesus...* in a city where the values of Rome and the reign of Caesar were uniquely and deeply celebrated, evident and embraced.

Sounds like Victoria...

Third and last, we need to remember that Paul – the author of this letter – **wrote this letter from prison**. Paul was no armchair theologian, writing letters from some place of privilege, dispensing spiritual thoughts that have no bearing in reality. No, Paul wrote this letter from prison – as one whose loyalty to Jesus and the gospel had meant the loss of so much. -----

Ok, so with that, let's listen now to Paul's words to the Philippians in **ch.3:12-4:1...**

Starting actually in **v.10...** **where we hear Paul, in prison, say...**

"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."

This was Paul's passion – his joy – knowing Christ Jesus his Lord
– "for whose sake [he's] lost all things..."

And so now, v.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. 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 for the prize of the upward call of God in **Christ Jesus. 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. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

***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. 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. Their destiny is their destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their minds are set on earthly things.*

***But our citizenship** is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour 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.*

*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, **stand firm in the Lord** in this way, dear friends!*

Let's pray.

Like many other parts of Philippians, this passage is **well-known** – well, at least the first portion of it. Paul's tenacious pursuit of Christ, that is. His **pressing on**... And the example this is for us...

Twice he refers to this explicitly...

v.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..."*

And then again in **v.13-14** – *"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."*

Or as the ESV has it,

*"**I press on toward** the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus..."*

And **Paul's example** in this – Paul's passionate and tenacious allegiance to Jesus – is inspiring, isn't it?

And intentionally so. **Necessarily** so.

In **v.15f** Paul explicitly calls **us all to take such a view of things** – and to follow his example.

And in doing so, he describes this passionate, tenacious pursuit as a matter or mark of **spiritual maturity**.

Which is interesting, since we often equate spiritual zeal with spiritual infancy, don't we? As something to be **expected** of new Christians, but that should **calm down** with the passing of time...

Which happens often – though not, according to Paul, as a matter of maturity.

According to scripture (whether we're reading the psalms of David, of the teaching of Jesus, or the witness of the apostle Paul), mature Christian faith is marked by humble and tenacious hunger for

Jesus and his reign – an awareness that we have not arrived, and that more grace is needed and available in Christ...

Paul's passionate **pressing on** is **an example** to us.

One that we are called to follow.

That's what he says, right? **v.17** – *"Join together in following my example, and just as you have us as an example, keep your eyes on those who live as we do..."*

And, as far as I can see, **we need this desperately.**

His example and **call could not be more needed** – as a word to many of us – **all** of us – in our Philippi, and especially in our trials...

Honestly, are we not all tempted, at times, to **give in** or **give up** pursuing, trusting and following Jesus?

Wouldn't it be easier sometimes to do otherwise?

And not just sometimes...

And so to us all, Paul says, **"Press on"**.

"Press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of you..."

Press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus..."

Press on, dear friends.

Let's be honest, this is a word, a call that many of us **need** to hear **today** – and again and again – because there is much that beckons us to abandon our post as followers of Jesus...

There is much that beckons us to **give in** or **give up** on our obedience and loyalty to Jesus...

There is much that beckons us to **reconsider**, or to simply stop all the considering and just do *what our heart wants to do*, or what would be **easy** to do...

What we see **others doing**... so easily... and so often...

Which Paul refers to in this passage.

This is one of the reasons why he implores us to keep our eyes on him and those who live like him – who **press on** in the costly pursuit of Jesus...

v.18-19, *"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. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their minds are set on earthly things..."*

They live according to their appetites... their current wants... cravings... desires...

And their example is everywhere, and at times, **very inviting**.

At times, even **convincing**.

I mean, why would God **make us** to crave companionship, to crave intimacy, to crave sexual fulfillment, to crave passion, to crave

adrenaline, to crave freedom, *and then not want it for us when it's standing right in front of us?*

This is the narrative that so many live right before our eyes – and which *our Philippi* – *our dominant culture* – celebrates as the ideal... the way to true fulfillment... *our freedom and inalienable right*.

And not just in the secular culture, but often, at times, within the church. *Honestly, how many books, blogs and podcasts are there these days that have a sprinkling of Jesus and Scripture, and a flood of self-fulfillment?*

And, contrary to what we often say, **this is nothing new.**

This was exactly the same in Paul's day and in Philippi in the first century – a few decades after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

"**Many**," Paul says, "*Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.*"

Many who even claim to follow Jesus, but, according to Paul, whose lives show no evidence of the cross – no evidence of allegiance to a crucified King.

And before any of us push back with the response, "*Well easy for you to say...*" **Remember**... Remember that this **word – this call** – this example is spoken from the lips and life of one who's tenacious allegiance to Jesus – whose pressing on – meant the loss of so much... basic human freedoms, in fact...

Paul spent the rest of his life in and out of prison **because of his pressing on** in the pursuit of Christ.

So, how did Paul do it? What kept him **pressing on** in the face of the hardships that doing so brought him?

Because, it's not enough to simply say to one another, or even to ourselves: "**press on**".

Come on, press on friend! Press on self!

Truth is, **we can't**. Not for long, at least.

Not without something else pulling us forward.

Which is **the real example of Paul** in this passage.

And this is the part of the passage that we **need** to notice – the way that Paul repeatedly talks about **the goal** of his pressing on... the goal, the vision, the hope that **keeps** him pressing on. "*Straining toward **what is ahead**...*"

In truth, I wish this was the part that was most known in this passage – **because without it**, Paul himself would not have pressed on... And we would not have this letter at all.

So, listen again to Paul's repeated emphasis here...

v.12 – "*Not that I have already obtained this or have already arrived at **my goal**...*"

v.13-14 – "*Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself 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** of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus...*"

So, ***what is this goal?*** What is "***the upward call of God in Christ Jesus***"?

Well, first let me say that what captivated Paul's heart and mind and imagination, and inspired him to **press on** was not simply ***his*** goal – but his knowledge of ***God's goal***.

The **end** to which God **is** at work in all who are in Christ... The goal of all that God is doing in the world...

And we hear it so clearly near the end of our passage.

v.20-21 – "*But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour 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.*"

Now the danger in reading or hearing these verses is that we'd latch onto a single word – and misread the whole.

One being that we'd fixate on the word "**heaven**" – ("*our citizenship is in heaven*") and misinterpret this passage to be saying that our hope is to one day leave all this behind and go to heaven.

But, if we pay attention to more than this one word, we'll notice that Paul's hope is for Jesus, our King, our Saviour, to come **from there** – **from heaven** – to bring everything under his control - **here**.

*Our hope is not for escape from earth, but redemption **of** the earth.*

And similarly, **the last line** is dangerous in how easily we could interpret it as only referring to the **resurrection** of our bodies.

But Paul is declaring something **so much greater** than that here – as glorious as that is. He's naming something that gets **far more** to the core of our need.

Remember how just a few verses before this, Paul talks about the **destruction** that comes from living according to our bodily appetites? Right? **V.19**, "*Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.*"

Listen, Paul is no **Platonist** – no body-hater – as though the body (and matter) is all bad and something to be liberated from for the sake of the Good which is the spiritual. No, *following Jesus and the biblical witness*, Paul's theology celebrates the physical, the creation, including our bodies – as integral to God's purposes and glory.

But, that said, he is not blind to the way **the curse** has wreaked havoc in not just our minds, but also **our bodies**... And not just in sickness and death, but in distorting our very desires, cravings and affections.

And we all know this by experience.

Not to say that all of our desires, cravings and affections are evil, but neither are they all good or for our good.

WE all, at times, desire and crave wrong things. Or we desire and seek good things in the wrong way, or in the wrong place...

This is why Paul speaks here of our "**lowly bodies**".

Or as one translation puts it, "**the body of our humiliation.**"

That's not just poetic language. That's a reality we all know by experience.

Listen to how one theologian describes it. He writes,

"Here is an area where we all constantly fall short and fail: we fail to control our lust, manage our tongue, overcome the laziness which keeps us out of bed too late at night and in bed too late in the morning, and subdue the 'unwilling flesh' which clogs the ambitions of the 'willing spirit'. This is not to mention the gradual failing of bodily strength with the passing years, so that our mental powers wane and understanding diminishes, or the debilitating and often humiliating aspects of illness, or failing sight, or any of the other numerous ways in which the body holds us back and keeps us down – truly *our lowly body...*" (J.A. Motyer)

And Paul knew this so well, but his heart and mind weren't stuck here. Paul looked ahead with hope and thankfulness to the coming of Jesus who will not just **resurrect** our bodies, but who will "**transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.**"

What a hope that we all ache for *deep in our bones*. Literally!

Hear again, this same **theologians response...**

"In place of a body which is so often at odds with spiritual aspirations, so often a drag on our spiritual endeavors, there will be a body matching his [that is Christ's] in being the perfect means of living the full, whole life of Christ." (Motyer)

This goal – this vision – this hope captivated and inspired Paul to press on... The end, the goal, the hope of **all things**, including

our very bodies, being brought under the complete and utter Lordship of Jesus Christ.

"On earth as it is in heaven..."

All of our bodily hungers aligned with the good purposes of God.

All of our deep affections aligned with the good purposes of God
– because Jesus Christ has come and made all things subject to His good and beautiful reign.

Knowing and loving God with *all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind and all of our **strength*** – as God intended in the beginning...

This is the vision and hope that captured Paul and enabled him to **press on** in the way of the cross...

And not only that, but this is the very thing ***for which*** Paul was pressing on. *That's what he says.*

v.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.***"

There are two things here that he is saying.

One: that Christ Jesus has already taken hold of him.

What a beautiful distillation of the mystery of grace... the mystery of Christian conversion.

This is what Alec and Carlie bore witness to us a few minutes ago in their baptisms. Yes, their allegiance to Jesus. But why? Because, as Paul says, "*Christ Jesus took hold of me.*"

"*Christ Jesus took hold of me.*"

This is our baptismal confession.

But it is more than that.

It is also the **ultimate goal** of God's grace in us – that this grace – the Lordship of Jesus Christ – would ***overtake – take hold of*** – the whole of our being – body and soul – and the whole of creation – ***making all things subject to Christ.***

On earth as it is in heaven...

And because of this – because the One who will **ultimately** and **fully** redeem, restore and transform Paul had already claimed him – taken him as His own – Paul could "***press on toward the goal...***"

To take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him.

So what about you and me?

In what way do we need to hear this word today?

In what are we tempted to give in or give up on pursuing, trusting and following Christ and the way of Christ?

Where do we need to press on?

And with this – to that end:

What vision have we allowed to captivate and lead us?

Chapter 4:1 – *"My brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!*

Come to Christ today – that He might lift up your eyes and empower you to press on...

-----→ invitation to the Lord's Table

benediction -----

- The prodigal son returning home – *"keep running till you see Him"*