

Philippians 3 pt. 2 v.12-16

The Long Walk

In the preceding verses Paul came to the conclusion that everything he had accomplished religiously was nothing compared to knowing Christ, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings.

Paul desired to know Jesus deeply; even to the extent of suffering in his own life so that he might understand the fullness of Christ's work. This indicates far more than a superficial following of Jesus. It shows us a completely committed life buried in the work of Christ.

Even with such strong language and apparent commitment to Christ we find an admission of imperfection as we arrive at verse 12. However, this self-acknowledgment of imperfection does not stop Paul from a continued pursuit of Jesus.

V.12-14 - Paul, having labored so long for the risen Lord Jesus Christ wasn't done yet.

It is likely that at this time Paul was in his 50s and had already written Galatians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Corinthians, and Romans; and was in the process of authoring Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and this very letter - Philippians. He had already lived all of what is recorded in the Book of Acts and been on Three Missionary Journeys.¹

By this time in his life Paul referred to his own self as “aged.”
(Philemon 1:9)

This giant of the faith dedicated himself to pressing onward toward perfection, toward a final resurrection and grasping that final prize - eternity with Jesus because Jesus Christ had grasped him!

The NIV does an admirable job translating this verse:

“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.” (Phil 3:12, NIV)

¹ “Apostle Paul’s Timeline” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/paul/timeline.cfm>

This is the desire that springs alive in the saints when we are grasped by Jesus.

First and foremost, Jesus is the victor - He wins us to Himself and being won to Him we then move toward that upward call throughout our lives - over the decades. We are won all at once, we are perfected our entire lives.

This is one of those wonderful portions of Scripture that communicate to us, at least in some measure, the intersection of God's sovereignty and election (especially in Paul's life) and human response (will).

Notice the humility and reflection in Paul's language, "I do not count myself to have apprehended..." (v.13) Paul doesn't present to us either pollyanna Christianity where everything is roses all the time; nor defeated Christianity where we can never gain any ground. Rather Paul presents an honest reckoning of himself that demonstrates the doctrine of sanctification.

Sanctification is one of those ten dollar church words that sometimes makes people tune out but can be summed up simply

as, “a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives.”²

This is the growing maturity and holiness that Paul is so enthusiastic about and is to be evident in the lives of the saints. Rather than espousing a flat, motionless position, Paul takes personal responsibility for forging ahead toward holiness - toward Christ-likeness, culminating in what he calls “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

The image we get is that Paul views himself as a competitor in this grand redemptive narrative, not just a fan, disinterested passerby, or spectator.

This is a theme in Paul’s writings. He never views himself a passive entity relative to the gospel. While his faith is decidedly won by Christ, Paul acknowledges the personal responsibility that comes with being grasped by Christ - to move to the sound of His call, to compete with a vested interest in the final results.

Paul uses similar language with the Corinthian church:

² Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 746–747.

[1Co 9:24-27 NKJV] 24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain [it]. 25 And everyone who competes [for the prize] is temperate in all things. Now they [do it] to obtain a perishable crown, but we [for] an imperishable [crown]. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as [one who] beats the air. 27 But I discipline my body and bring [it] into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Or, as the author of Hebrews writes:

[Heb 12:1-2 NKJV] 1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares [us], and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of [our] faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So we run with purpose, with a clear mind, ignoring those past things that weigh us down and with our hearts set firmly on reaching the end. We do this not to win Christ --He won us! -- but

BECAUSE of the example we have in Christ of endurance, faithfulness, and grit.

It has been preached many times before that our faith is a marathon, not a sprint. Many believers have fallen away far from reaching the finish line believing that short bursts of holiness would get them to the end. What we find is that only Christ's grace and a protracted endurance results in a race well run.

In the Army there is this sort of lore surrounding special operators and their selection process.

For those soldiers seeking to serve at the highest levels of special operations they must endure years of grueling, rigorous training. They must demonstrate that they are far and above the top representatives of the profession of arms.

Part of their selection culminates in what is sometimes referred to as "the long walk;"

"About the "long walk," one source reports, "It's 40 miles long, it's conducted on the last day of training when candidates are already physically and mentally completely exhausted, and the rucksacks

weigh 70 pounds...there is an unpublished time limit of 20 hours. And candidates can't march together, each gets their own points and has to walk them alone. And...they don't actually ever know the full course, only their next point.”³

Now, it's fun to sing about being in the Lord's Army -- yes sir! But the long walk awaits us all and that is what truly reveals our motivation, commitment, drive, and ultimately our love.

I have spoken with many pastors who are discouraged at the impact that our instant society has had on commitment, discipleship, and caring. We have together lamented the scourge of consumerism that marks even our Christian culture and causes vast swaths of believers to flit in and out of churches week in and week out with seemingly no home and no concern for what it means to be part of Christ's bride over the long-term.

None of this is new. We've all witnessed the pervasive phenomenon of nominal consumeristic Christianity. In 1980 Eugene Peterson wrote with the hope of reviving understanding among Christians regarding the long-haul of our faith.

³<https://www.businessinsider.com/delta-force-long-march-the-grueling-final-test-to-select-its-operators-2019-4>

He wrote:

“Religion in our time has been captured by the tourist mindset. Religion is understood as a visit to an attractive site to be made when we have adequate leisure. For some it is a weekly jaunt to church; for others, occasional visits to special services. Some, with a bent for religious entertainment and sacred diversion, plan their lives around special events like retreats, rallies and conferences. We go to see a new personality, to hear a new truth, to get a new experience and so somehow expand our otherwise humdrum lives. The religious life is defined as the latest and the newest: Zen, faith healing, human potential, parapsychology, successful living, choreography in the chancel, Armageddon. We’ll try anything -- until something else comes along...for pastors in Western culture at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the aspect of [the] world that makes the work of leading Christians in the way of faith most difficult is...’today’s passion for the immediate and casual.’ Everyone is in a hurry. The persons whom I lead in worship, among whom I counsel, visit, pray, preach and teach, want

shortcuts. They want me to help them fill out the form that will get them instant credit (in eternity)...It is [a] 'long obedience in the same direction' which the mood of the world does so much to discourage."⁴

While the world discourages this long race of ours, God's word affirms it as a reality and something to be fully engaged in.

I want to point out that Paul's wording in these verses, a declaration of commitment in the long-term, is equally a rejection of the "I've arrived" syndrome.

The "I've arrived" syndrome is one of those intersections that Christians encounter during our long walk. Having gained a little knowledge and understanding we believe we've learned everything! This is a significant and dangerous obstacle. If we are not careful we can be enticed into taking a seat on the roadside and failing to advance any further.

Let Paul's example be our own -- we have not yet attained that which is set before us.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 10-11.

Let's be very clear about the application here, lest we in error believe that Paul's specificity in writing about himself relinquishes us of any requirement of the same commitment.

Certainly we ourselves have said many times, "Yeah, but I'm not Paul!" Or, more commonly, "I'm not Jesus."

Both of those are true, but most often those statements are not born out of a humble assessment of faith but more trying to absolve ourselves of any real requirement that the text calls us to. The implication when we make these types of statements, "I'm not Paul," or "I'm not Jesus," is that we don't have the required strength or desire to do whatever holy thing is laid before us.

I would argue against those assertions and point to Paul's words: [1Co 11:1 NKJV] 1 Imitate me, just as I also [imitate] Christ.

The reality is that we are SUPPOSED to be and ARE BEING conformed into the image of Christ as we journey along through this life.

So while we are not yet like Christ fully we are to resemble Him more and more everyday and shun the half-hearted excuse, “I’m not Jesus.”

As Paul writes, again to the Corinthians: [1Co 15:49 NKJV] ...as we have borne the image of the [man] of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly [Man].

So PRESS ON loved one! Move out for Jesus. Compete for the prize!

V.15 - Paul addresses those who would reject this call to press-on, to reach forward, head on.

He calls for a unity among those who desire to press into Christ’s kingdom, calling for the support of those who are “mature.”

This terminology is meant to communicate the idea, “of persons who are fully up to standard in a certain respect and not satisfied with half-way measures...”⁵ Additionally, it can signify a “grown person.”⁶

⁵ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 995.

⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 104.

The point then is that those who are “spiritually grown” will find themselves in agreement with Paul on the call to endurance over the long-term -- they will have a shared mind with Paul.

Blessedly, Paul makes allowance for those who disagree though! He even indicates that God will teach them along the way. This pairs nicely with what we’ve said about sanctification.

All the negative things that have been said so far are not meant to be dismissive or to rid ourselves of half-hearted believers. When it comes to the very real and common conditions of consumerism in the faith, instant gratification, shallow understanding, and rebellious hearts who don’t see the need to conform to the image of Christ, all of those conditions can be temporary because God is the one who is responsible for our sanctification. He is the one who changes us if we are obedient to His call to follow.

Many of us have lived in these conditions. Many of us have been self-righteous know it alls, judgmental porcupines, theological hacks, and impostors. BUT Christ redeemed us and changed our minds and our lives by His Spirit and by His word.

There is hope, loved one, as we journey together that Christ will continue to reveal things to us that will shape us more and more into His image.

V.16 - Paul circles back to the idea of attainment or grasping the final prize.⁷

Remember, in v. 12 Paul wrote, “Not that I have already attained...” but now says, “Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained...”

What this means practically and as a unified text in plain language is “we don’t know, we haven’t grasped EVERYTHING; but we do know, we have grasped SOME things.”

To the extent that we have grasped, taken hold of SOME things let us then walk together in unity holding fast to what we do have and pressing on toward the ultimate goal - eternity with Christ.

⁷ “λαμβάνω [*lambano*] ...: to take hold of something or someone, with or without force—‘to take hold of, to grasp, to grab.’” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 219.

The NLT renders this verse, “But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.”

We’re in this together! So let us continue to march on together. Mercifully our long walk isn’t intended to be done alone. We are gifted with fellowship with one another and with Christ. It involves pressing forward as the Lord shapes our understanding. While we don’t know the distance or the duration of our walk we rejoice in the hope of finishing strong.

Let this be an encouragement to press on, to keep reaching forward:

[1Ti 6:12-16 NKJV] 12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and [before] Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, 14 that you keep [this] commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ’s appearing, 15 which He will manifest in His own time, [He who is] the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has

seen or can see, to whom [be] honor and everlasting power.
Amen.