

Week 8: Pressing On

Chapter 3:12-20

So far... we've seen Paul's affection towards the Philippian church, and his desire for them to grow in Gospel-centred love. Paul testifies to his desire to boldly glorify Jesus whether by life or by death, and then urges the church to humble Gospel-centred unity. He calls them to shine like stars in the darkness of the world, following the example of Jesus, and other Gospel-hearted men, and then exposes for them the emptiness of religion compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

Forward Focus

"But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize" (3:13-14)

There's a great power in the testimonies and attitudes of men like Paul, even to us living nearly 2 millennia after this man who was greatly used of God. Think about Paul's achievements in his ministry - how many churches has he planted? How many people has he seen saved? How many healed? Set free? Paul's life has played a large part in the whole known world being turned upside down by the Gospel and has greatly populated the kingdom of heaven.

Of course he'd tell you that none of the glory goes to him, and none of it was accomplished in his own wisdom and strength, but think about this - if there was ever a Christian who could sit back, survey their life's work, write their memoirs and take a breather, surely it's the Apostle Paul? Could you really begrudge him a quiet retirement in a country cottage and a few rounds of golf (or whatever the 1st century equivalent might be!)

Yet is this Paul's attitude at all? No - in fact he goes full steam in the opposite direction. Far from sitting back and resting, Paul's language speaks of great

effort not to go backwards or even stand still, but he presses on, he strains forward, not looking back to the past, but always looking to the next person that the Lord wants him to witness to, and the next church that he's called to encourage.

This isn't saying that the past is of no use to us - of course there are encouragements and faith-building experiences that make the past a powerful tool in shaping our future - but all of us know just how easy it is to not just draw on the past for strength going forward, but to start living entirely in the past and becoming unfruitful going forward.

Paul wants us to realise that time in this world is short, and that every day is a new day to be penning a new story of how God can use His people to bring change in His world. Not every day will be a dramatic day of change, but every single one is an opportunity to press on into the plans and purposes of God for His world.

For Discussion:

How can we stop ourselves being satisfied with the past and press forward into all that God has for us?

Other Verses for study:

• 1 Cor 9:1-27 • Heb 12:1-17 • 2 Tim 4:6-8

The Mind of the Mature

“Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.” (3:15)

This to me is a fascinating little line that Paul slots in the letter at this point. He’s calling the Philippian church to an attitude of great perseverance, focus and commitment in their relationship with God, and you would I think rightly assume that this would be for all the church to aspire to. Yet Paul seems to say in this verse that the attitude is primarily for those of the church who are mature, so what’s he trying to communicate here?

My take on it is this: Paul is well aware that the kind of life that he’s calling the church to is full of pitfalls, and not least the danger of seeing this call to action in some kind of legalistic way. The kind of thought that says ‘if I run fast enough, press forward hard enough, and show enough commitment to the cause, then God will love me’. This couldn’t be further from the truth - in fact, Paul has just got done slamming this kind of religious effort/achievement mentality in the previous chapter. He’s just told us that of this kind of achievement based system is rubbish, and he’s left it all behind for something far greater - living out of a relationship

Minds Set on Heaven

“...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:20)

As Paul finishes our section for this week, he returns to warning us of those who may claim to be following Jesus, but their lives are anything but the kind of life Paul is calling us to live. His main distinction in these verses is what these people are focussing their lives on. The ‘enemies of the cross’ that Paul is describing have their minds set on earthly things, and he contrasts that with the believers focus on heaven, where we belong, and from where Jesus will return to fulfil all his promises to His people.

Paul makes it clear what the destination for these kinds of people is - they will one day face destruction if they don’t repent of their false religion. He describes the fact that it’s their fleshly appetites, including the one for food that rule them, and have become their objects of worship rather than God Himself. Not only this, but their lives have become so twisted that they actually find their glory in that which is in reality shameful. These people may have an outward form of religion, but all they can see is the here and now. They have no concept of unseen, eternal things & as a result their religion is empty.

with Jesus that informs, empowers and transforms the way that we run the race set before us in this life.

No longer do we run to gain the favour of God, but we run because we’ve received the favour of God. We’re not straining and striving to earn the love of God, but because He already loves us and we want to love Him in return. These are the basic foundation attitudes of the Christian faith, and if we’re honest, it’s not easy for our minds to grasp them when we’re so used to systems that demand that we be good enough.

This foundation doesn’t diminish the call to press forward, in fact grasping these things will enable us to run even faster because we don’t do it from a place of insecurity and fear. However, you can see why Paul might add a word of warning - make sure you’ve laid these foundations well or we could be looking at some serious frustration and burn-out if we’re running for the wrong reasons and motivation.

For Discussion:

What are the signs that we’ve laid Gospel foundations well in our lives?

Other Verses for study:

• Ephesians 2:1-11 • Titus 3:5-7

Paul then begins to counter the worldly focus of those he is warning the church about by speaking of heaven. Firstly, he speaks of the fact that our citizenship is right now in heaven. Notice he doesn’t talk about a future citizenship - he talks about the fact that even as we continue to live in this world we actually belong to the kingdom of heaven. This reality translates exactly into the way we are called to live. If we were to seek to build any of the kingdoms of this world, the results would undoubtedly be outward and obvious, but heaven is different. To be seeking to build an unseen kingdom means that the activities and results of this lifestyle will primarily be unseen - as Jesus says, we lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth.

Not only that, but Paul continues to speak of the transformation of our earthly bodies when Jesus returns - yet another truth that calls us away from the everyday concerns of this life, to live for that which will last for ever.

For Discussion:

How can we turn our attention away from this world and on to heaven?

Other Verses for study:

• Colossians 3:1-17 • 1 Cor 3:10-15 • Matt 6:19-24