

Philippians #6 - Pressing on

Bible Reading

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. 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.

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 towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:7-14

In the previous message we saw Paul encouraging the Philippian believers to stand firm in their faith, using his companions as examples. He follows on from this by repeating his previous exhortation (Phil 2:18) to rejoice in the Lord.

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

Philippians 3:1

As a younger man I was a keen motorcyclist. One of my good friend's uncles was a police motorcyclist and he gave me this advice.

When you see an obstacle, the temptation is to focus on it... but if you do, your brain tells your body to steer toward it, with obvious undesirable consequences.

Police motorcyclists are trained to look away from the obstacle and fix their eyes on where they want to go, so their brain tells their body to steer around it.

As I emphasised in the last talk, Paul is eager to keep the Philippian believers focussed not on their problems (the obstacle) but on the one who can help them through those problems (Jesus).

And rejoicing in the Lord, his goodness and love, is one of the ways we can reverse our tendency to be obsessed with ourselves, one of the biggest obstacles to growing in our faith.

Praising God helps us to see things from God's perspective, how much we are loved and held in his supernatural grace and strength. It is what humans were designed to do, to delight in a loving, trusting relationship with our creator.

And this is not always easy to do. It is not instinctive or intuitive. That's why Paul is repeating it. The world we live in is broken. Whether we are young or old, we are broken. Our bodies are subject to illness and the wear and tear of living.

Many of us here are no longer in the first flush of youth! We ache in places that once upon a time we weren't even aware of! Things that were once easy to do are becoming more of a struggle.

And as it is with us as individuals, so it is with us as a church community. But despite our ageing congregation, declining numbers and aching joints, we still worship the same Lord Jesus. Are we going to continue to rejoice in him, or waste our time grumbling and remembering the 'good old days'?

As Paul says, rejoicing in God's goodness is a 'safeguard' against self-centredness and introspection.

As we rejoice in God's goodness to us, we are saying 'I don't know what the future holds, but I know the one who holds the future, and rather than waste my time worrying about all the things that are going wrong and that could go wrong, I'm going to focus on the one who can make them go right'.

And having emphasised the positive, you can almost hear the crunching and grinding noises as Paul abruptly changes gear.

Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

Philippians 3:2

Whoa!! Don't hold back Paul, say what you really think!

To explain what is going on here, we need to take a look at what was happening in the early Christian community.

The vast majority of the first Christians were Jews. The twelve disciples were all Jewish, as were the majority of Jesus' followers.

Jesus was born into a devoutly Jewish family, he was circumcised on the eighth day, and would have observed all the traditional Jewish practices and ceremonies.

And the scriptures the first Christians studied were Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. And it is from these books that the Jews had formed their religious practices, including male circumcision, doing no work on Saturdays, not eating pork, etc.

And, on the whole, the Jews kept to these practices.

The same scriptures also emphasise that Israel was to be a special people who would attract other nations to follow their God.

They weren't so good at that one.

During his time on earth, Jesus started to drop large hints that while his earthly ministry was primarily to the Jews, the good news he was bringing, the free offer of God's forgiveness and love, was for everyone.

And he also said and did things that indicated the Old Testament laws had always been pointers to a more expansive, inclusive way of being a part of God's people.

After his resurrection, just before his ascension into heaven, his final command to his followers was to make disciples of ALL nations.
(Matthew 28:18-20a)

The book of Acts describes how, through visions, experience and examining the scriptures, the early Church begins to realise afresh that God's redemptive plan for humanity includes everyone; male and female, slave and free, Jew and non-Jew.

However there were people in the leadership of the church who, while delighted that non-Jews were being accepted into God's family, assumed that they should adopt the Jewish customs, including being circumcised (hence Paul's 'mutilators of the flesh' remark), not eating pork, etc.

And more than this, they saw these actions as being an essential part of being part of God's people. Yes, you needed to believe in Jesus, but you also had to obey all of the Jewish laws and customs.

In modern day terminology, this was the ultimate 'trigger' for Paul.

If you wanted to see Paul go off on one, you only had to suggest that humans had to rely on anything but God's grace, goodness and love for their salvation.

So Paul continues...

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh...

Philippians 3:3-4a

Paul had come to realise that circumcision, Sabbath observance and dietary laws were never intended to be 'entry tickets' to God's family. Grace, God's undeserved favour, has been God's nature from the very beginning.

Again and again the Bible records how God acts first to reach out to his people, for no other reason than his very being defines what we know as relationship, goodness and love.

And Jesus is the ultimate example of this, his life and words revealed that God wants us to live lives that are free from guilt and fear.

Jesus emphasised that the Old Testament was pointing to himself as a fuller understanding of how God relates to his creation, embodied in his life and teaching, and ultimately his death, resurrection and ascension.

And while Jesus' earthly ministry was primarily to the Jews, he dropped some fairly massive hints that he was the one who Isaiah was talking about when he wrote...

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 49:6

So, back to Paul.

Now Paul was about as Jewish as you can possibly be... as he continues...

...though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Philippians 3:4b-6

But his encounter with the risen Christ as he was on his way to arrest followers of Jesus, had persuaded him that placing his confidence in his ancestry and rigid rule-keeping was a mistake.

Which brings us to some of the most famous verses in the New Testament...

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Philippians 3:7-9

Wow!

For many of us these are familiar words. As a young Christian I was encouraged to memorise them.

The problem with familiarity is that it can lessen the impact that the words had when you first encountered them.

To Paul, all that matters is that he knows Jesus, his Lord. All his worldly status is rubbish compared to 'gaining Christ'.

Like the parable that Jesus told, the good news of the Gospel is the pearl that is worth getting rid of everything you own to gain.

And just in case 'gaining Christ' sounds like you who have to work for it, Paul moves to his favourite language of believers being 'in Christ'.

We come into a relationship with God not because of our righteousness, our work, our obedience, but through faith in Christ, righteousness that is itself a gift from God, on the basis of faith... itself a gift from God!!

So, having explained *how* we come to be found *in* Christ, he returns to what he considers the greatest thing, *knowing* Christ.

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.

First the good bit.

Knowing Christ means knowing the power of his resurrection. As Paul will later mention, this includes the promise that one day all Christians will be equipped with bodies like the one that Jesus now has after rising from the grave. Bodies that are equipped for eternity.

But resurrection power is not limited to when we die, or when Jesus returns. This power is available to every Christian to help us reject and get rid of things that hold us back from properly following Jesus, and to live less selfish lives that reflect God's grace and love to those around us.

But that's not the whole package.

Knowing Christ also involves 'participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death'.

As a soft 21st century westerner, I recoil from verses like this. But it is a theme that runs through the scriptures, especially the New Testament, and particularly in the writings of Paul.

Any balanced reading of the Bible's 66 books will reveal that being a faithful follower of God doesn't guarantee an easy life. Standing up for what is right has never been a good way to gain popularity with the majority of people.

Jesus was the greatest example of this. Pure moral perfection. Loving and generous. Healing the sick. Showing respect to the outcast and downtrodden. And living a joyous life, enjoying talking, eating and drinking with the people he met.

And we know where that led to.

The original hearers of this letter would have understood what Paul is saying. They had not become Christians because they thought it would make them healthy, rich and prosperous.

On the contrary, they became followers of Jesus *despite* the fact that they knew it was going to make them even less popular, less comfortable and less secure than they were before they became believers.

The early church community became Christians because they believed that faith in Jesus would allow them to enjoy a relationship with the creator of the universe, the ability to live lives that were free of guilt, revenge, anger and self-loathing.

Nearly 2,000 years after this letter was written, we live in a time and place where people who lived out their Christian faith have changed the world we live in, often massively for the better.

We live in a society where we take it for granted that slavery and infanticide are wrong.

Where we take it for granted that education and health care is for everyone, that males and females have equal value.

These are all Christian values, fought for at great cost by thousands upon thousands of faithful believers, that we now enjoy the benefit of. And as a result our ‘sufferings’ may be less, or at the very least different, to those of Paul’s original hearers.

But one thing that hasn’t changed is that knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection involves us dying to our selfish nature.

In these verses, Paul is echoing the example of Jesus’ life in the preceding chapter, about the importance of putting others before ourselves.

There is no skipping the tough stuff. In the Christian life, death to self is inseparable to the resurrection life we enjoy in Christ.

You can’t have one without the other.

And this has never been easy. Paul acknowledges it is a struggle...

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 towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:12-14

There have been a number of occasions in my life where people have approached me for advice on exercise and diet issues.

I take them through a variety of recommendations involving regular sessions of weight training, stretching and cardiovascular exercise, along with monitoring their calorific intake, waist size and weight.

The few who put this advice into practice regularly come back to me to express their delight at the results they are achieving, along with the inevitable question, ‘How long do I have to do this for?’

To which I reply, ‘until the day you die’.

If you had asked Paul how long it would take to achieve the Christian goal, he would have given a similar answer.

Jesus takes hold of us. We hold on to Jesus. We press on to what what Jesus calls us to do. Repeat.

We often hear that the Christian life is a journey. The good news is that its not all journey.

There is a goal, and that goal is to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection.

And while in this life, along with the joy of being in a loving relationship with the creator and sustainer of the universe, that will involve suffering, and eventually death, we know that this is not the end. One day we will, like Jesus, be raised to new, perfect, everlasting life in God’s presence.

Now that’s a goal to aim for.

Today, ask Jesus to help you leave the failures and regrets with him, and make a new start, not in your own strength, but in his forgiveness, love and power.

And tomorrow do the same thing.

And the next day, forever and ever, Amen.