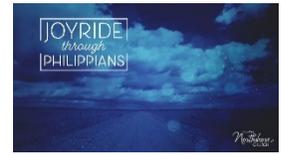


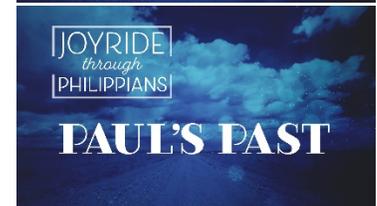
Paul's Present

We are back in chapter 3 of Philippians, in our series that we are calling Joyride Through Philippians... because joy and rejoicing is a theme that runs through this short book in our New Testaments.



Last week I explained that chapter 3 is dominated by Paul's story, his testimony of faith... and that story roughly breaks down into three sections:

- Paul's Past (last weeks emphasis)
- Paul's Future (what I have planned for next week), and today
- Paul's Present

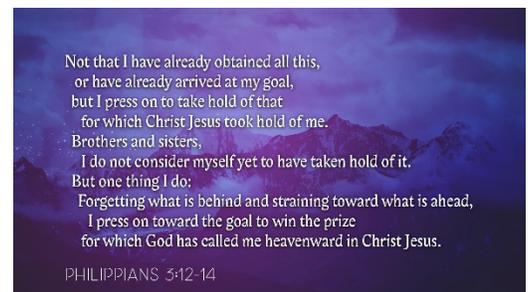


Paul's story is interesting, and instructive... and really important because it reveals a lot about the story God has for **all** His people (not merely an ancient, neary-mythical figure like the Apostle Paul)... for all who **know Jesus**.

Joy and rejoicing is a theme that dominates the entire book of Philippians. The theme of chapter 3 is the source and foundation for that joy and rejoicing: **knowing Jesus**.

Specifically today, I have in mind to look at three verses, starting with 3:12. Let's stand together and read them aloud.

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. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹

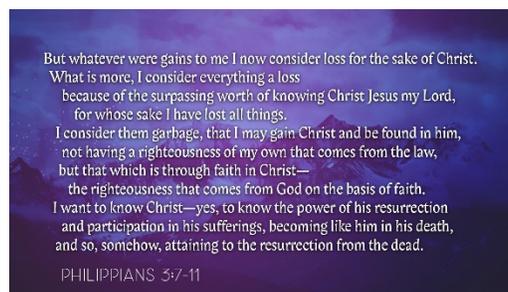


We ought to start by getting a handle on what “all this” is. For that, as we should expect, we can take a look at the preceding verses.

The general focus, up until now, has been Paul's past... that which he came out of. He talked about his heritage and religious pursuits, making it clear that if either could earn him righteous standing before God, Paul excelled. The he said:

¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 3:12–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ²



A heritage of faith is wonderful (Paul said he was “a Hebrew of Hebrews”) but it is nothing, a loss, in comparison to knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord. A zealous, precise, faultless life of religion may be admirable... but it too is nothing, a loss, in comparison to knowing Christ. Paul went so far as to consider it garbage (dung or rotten refuse), the kind of stuff that needs to be cast away because it is so toxic, in comparison to knowing Christ.

Whatever admirable thing that might be found in our heritage or genes is nothing. Whatever religious credit we might somehow build up to be found in our accounts is bankrupt in comparison to true righteousness. When examined by true holiness, whatever is found in us is quite worthless. It isn't what is found in us that matters; what matters is that we are found in Christ having the “righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

This is that which God calls us to... to know Him, to know Christ Jesus as our Lord. Knowing about Christ is good and all. Some know Jesus only in a superficial way, perhaps as the Babe of Bethlehem. Others know a lot about Jesus; He is certainly worthy of study. Who else has changed the course of human history like Jesus? But we are not merely called to know *about* Jesus; we are called to **know Jesus**. I want to know Christ.

Here is how we know Christ:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. ³

I have broken up chapter 3 into past, present, and future... but it is not all that simple. We see it here how past, present, and future are jumbled together.

² *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:7–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:10–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We are called to know Christ in “the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings.” That is looking back to what Jesus has done. He suffered. He was abandoned. He was betrayed. He suffered injustice. He was tortured and brutally executed. So that we could know Him, Jesus suffered.

And we look back on the power of His resurrection. Death could not hold Him. Jesus conquered sin and death.

Looking back on resurrection causes us to look forward to our resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the *down payment* and promise of resurrection for those who follow Jesus and believe. This is our future.

Between that future and that past, is our present. How do we know Christ in the present? We participate in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death. This is not to say that we invite suffering, or even relish or somehow enjoy suffering. There is no joy in such pursuit of suffering. But we do acknowledge suffering. Whether it is just the suffering that comes from the struggle with circumstances, or our own wars with sin... the suffering that comes with longing for finally fully knowing Jesus... or more likely the real suffering that this life holds, whether grief, or sickness... poverty, or pain... Jesus is with us in that suffering. And we will know Him... perhaps knowing Him closest and best in suffering.

I want to know Christ... knowing what He has done, knowing what He promised, and knowing Him each day.

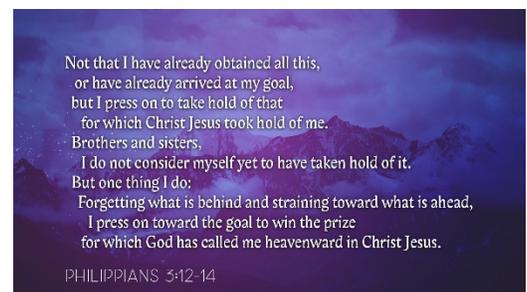
So when Paul says that he has not

“already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal⁴”

He is talking about fully knowing Christ.

It is the already and not yet aspect of our faith. We know Christ because, as Paul wrote, Christ Jesus has taken hold of us.

But in the middle of what Christ has accomplished and the future that Christ has promised, we have these days, these really important lives... and we press on.



⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 3:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.⁵

There it is again... that *already not yet*. Christ takes hold of us (already). By faith, turning to Jesus, saying **no** to whatever might be found in us and **yes** to Him... we are found in Him... **yet** we press on, reaching out to take hold of what He has for us.

Can you see it? Does anyone feel the tension as we are pulled forward, straining ahead and pressing on?

Here is the word picture Paul continues to paint:

But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.⁶

It is an athletic metaphor. The language here is athletic language, the sort of description of running to win a race... winning the prize by finishing the race... running the race well to win whatever trophy is reserved for the victor.

Does anyone know what that is like? I certainly never won any prize for my running... or any athletic endeavor as far as that goes. I'm old, so participation trophies weren't really a thing when I was a kid. I did win a fair amount of trophies and medals, more than most all of my athletic friends... but they were the sorts of trophies and medals awarded to band geeks. I had a letter jacket (is that still a thing?) but my multiple letters were in band.

So apart from the questions I have about winning a prize for running a race, the bigger question is this: **what is the prize** Paul is talking about? The prize isn't precisely explained in the text; the prize appears to be implied.

If I were reading this without thinking too much about it, I suppose I would conclude what I expect a lot of people think about Christianity and religious stuff in general, that the prize must be something like heaven... an eternal reward.

While resurrection and heaven and eternity with God and all is a wonderful promise, even a prize of sorts, is that what Paul is talking about?

I don't think so. If Paul were talking about pressing on, running a race, to win a prize of eternal reward... wouldn't that be the same sort of religious pursuit that he called dung just a few verses back. Is Paul saying that his new race is just another set of religious rules to follow to somehow win the race?

⁵ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:12–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:13–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Did Paul give up being a Jewish Pharisee so he could be a Christian Pharisee?

The prize here **cannot** be salvation and eternity. We don't run a race for salvation and eternity; we don't run a race to take hold of Jesus. Jesus takes hold of us. We don't run for righteousness; we receive God's righteousness by knowing Christ.

So if the prize isn't merely salvation and eternity, what is it? What is the race?

Might I describe the race with three words that I've used to describe our purpose, or mission, as a church? Could the race be

- upward facing,
- inward strong, and
- outward focused?



The race is **upward facing**. We press on, running the race, striving forward, as an act of worship. We respond to knowing Jesus with lives that live up to what Jesus has accomplished for us. We run the race upward facing; we worship the Triune God in His majesty, for His works and His love.

The race is **inward strong**. Running the race makes us better at running the race. I don't know much about running, but I do know that if I want to run better, faster, and longer... I have to run. We have church words for the running, like discipleship or edification. We run the race inward strong; we edify believers in Christian faith and equip them for service.

And the race is **outward focused**. When it comes to understanding the text and deciphering precisely what race Paul is running and what prize he has in mind, we do well to read his life as well as read his words. What was his life all about? What was his race all about?

I think we might sometimes think of this *race of faith* as a solitary thing. It is just me and Jesus... doing my thing... reading my stuff... praying my prayers... quietly singing my songs... not bothering anyone... just running my race.



In Paul's telling of his story, we could get the idea that he is just talking about running his solitary race. But if we think that Paul's race was just about himself, or our race is just for us... then we are not paying much attention to the Bible. We are misunderstanding the race to which we are called.

Our race isn't a solitary sprint... but rather a huge marathon with millions (billions) of participants. Not just our *jog* on our own, but runners around us, in front of us, behind us, as far as the eye can see, throughout human history.



This is the ***outward-focused*** call of the Bible. From the beginning God called for all people to be blessed. Jesus calls all to believe. And the promise of eternity is multiplied multitudes, from every tribe, tongue, and race.

Our race is a huge marathon. The ***winning*** isn't coming in first; the winning is coming in with the biggest crowd possible.

People like us, ***and*** not much like us, all knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

The race is outward focused. We proclaim the Gospel and reach out in acts of love, charity, and compassion in our community and the world. We run the race in such a way as others will run with us. We serve. We love. We give. We sacrifice. We preach, and teach, and baptize.

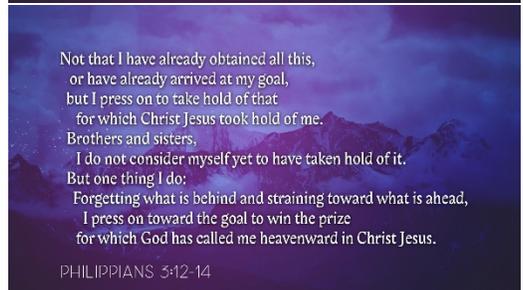


Upward facing. Inward strong. And outward focused... this is the race we are running and the prize we are taking hold of.



Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,
¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ⁷

We run to know Jesus now and eternally... and we run to bring as many as possible along with us to know Jesus.



Last week we closed with an old song that is based on the first part of Philippians 3: Knowing You. We are going to close with that again.

Let's take these last minutes together this morning to respond to God's call.

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 3:13–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We want to know Him.

And we want to know Him in such a way that others will know Him too... many others. Let's allow God to inspire our hearts and minds. Let's allow God to impress His love and forgiveness on our hearts. Let's allow God to give us gifts of faith, courage, and opportunity so that others might know Him too.

Maybe you don't know Him like what you're hearing today. Join the race. This is a good group to run with... and there is room for you.

