

Moving Past the Past

Aiming Higher . . . Pressing Onward, Part 4

Philippians 3:12-14

It was a clear sunny day on August 7, 1954 – perfect weather for the British Empire Games.

One particular event had gripped everyone’s interest and imagination. And that’s because, for the first time in sporting history, two men had recently run the mile in less than 4 minutes.

Roger Bannister from England and John Landy from Australia – and they were now going to face each other, along with other runners in the 1954 British Games.

The race was being called The Miracle Mile, because everyone expected a close, exciting, record breaking match.

Roger Bannister had strategized that he would relax some on the third lap of the four lap race; he planned to kick it into high gear, saving all his energy for the last lap.

But as they began the third lap, John Landy began to stretch his lead even further – and it was already impressive. So Bannister was forced to pick up the pace just simply to have a chance to win the race and as they began the fourth and final lap, Bannister had already cut the lead in half – and he was gaining ground.

I found the race in the CBS sports archives and watched it – it was thrilling race – especially the ending.

Landy began running faster and Bannister followed suit. Both men looked like they were running the 100 yard dash as they made the last turn on the track.

Then came that moment that would be played and replayed thousands of time in print and on flickering movie screens in black and white footage.

Landy was still in the lead by only a few steps. The crowd was roaring and cheering and he wondered where Bannister was – was he far back or close. And John Landy did the unthinkable. He looked back! He looked back over his left shoulder, which automatically broke his concentration and slowed his rhythm – and in that split second, Bannister, who was at his right shoulder, swept past him and won the race.¹

Looking back Landy would be the caption of a thousand pictures.

There are some essential rules for every sport – whether it’s keeping your head down while you swing at a golf ball or keeping your eye on the ball if you’re catching in center field or catching a football as a wide receiver.

But for a runner – never turning back to look – keeping your eye focused ahead – is an essential and fundamental rule of the game.

In Paul’s letter to the *Philippians, and in chapter 3*, he has been encouraging the flock to aim higher and press onward.

The chapter opens with his personal testimony and a list of all his achievements. But they didn’t matter anymore, simply because when it comes to the gospel, he had been chasing the wrong thing – he was aiming too low.

His testimony continued into the next paragraph by describing his goal in life – which now was to intimately know and closely walk with Jesus Christ. He had set his sights higher now.

If you were with us in our last few studies, the Apostle Paul had pulled out a ledger and calculated everything in his life as a big zero when compared to knowing and serving and suffering with Christ.

He was aiming higher and pressing onward.

Now, in this next paragraph, *Paul changes the language* from an accountant to an athlete; and more specifically – to running a race.

It happens to be one of his favorite metaphors throughout his letters.

And I’m going to let that metaphor serve as a guideline for us today as we work through this text.

In these next few verses, Paul is effectively going to provide for the believer nothing less than five essential attitudes for running the race of life!

Here’s the first essential attitude – let me paraphrase it for you in sentence form and then we’ll look at the text together; here it is:

1. **“I have come a long way, but I have not arrived!”**

In other words – and here’s the implicit example – get real.

Now open your Bibles, iPads and Androids to *Philippians chapter 3 and verse 10 where we'll get a running start: That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11. In order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect.*

Did you catch that? I haven't obtained it . . . what is it that he wants to obtain; is he talking about the resurrection? In a sense yes, but more than that, we're given a clue with this verb translated *perfect*.

I haven't . . . already become perfect.

It's the only time Paul uses this word in verb form in any of his letters (τετελειωμαι). It means to reach moral and spiritual perfection. You could translate it, "not as though I were now already perfected."ⁱⁱ

Paul does use this word as an adjective in several letters – and he uses it to refer to something that is pure and consistent (*Romans 12:2*); or, to be mature in your thinking as a spiritual adult (*I Corinthians 14:20*).

In other words, what Paul is saying here is, "I haven't reached a point in my Christian experience where I think after Christ and walk with Christ and model Christ with consistent purity and maturity.

Can you believe it? Paul, the super Apostle –

- the author of New Testament letters –
- the leader in the New Testament church –
- the recipient of heavenly visions and apostolic powers –
- the one given a personal tour of heaven –
- the clear thinking theologian –
- the incredibly faithful pioneer and persevering missionary –
- is admitting – shock of all shocks – that he hasn't arrived.

By the way, this is the attitude of any athlete – I can swing better, run faster, stay more focused and train harder.

This is what one author called holy dissatisfaction.

Warren Wiersbe wrote on this text, Paul never permitted himself to be satisfied with his spiritual progress; he was satisfied with Jesus Christ, but he was not satisfied with his Christian life – he lived with a sense of sanctified dissatisfaction.ⁱⁱⁱ

"Listen, I want you all to know in Philippi that I'm not as mature as I'd like to be – and I'm not anywhere near perfect . . . let's get real."

What an example! The truth is, we Christians get self-satisfied because we tend to compare our running with other Christians – and we usually find someone slower than us to watch.

We need to avoid the danger of comparing ourselves to someone slower than us – and someone faster than us!

Either extreme won't lead you to maturity, they either lead you to pride on the one hand – because you're so much faster – or discouragement on the other hand because you just can't seem to run as fast as that other believer.

Paul here is comparing himself to the goal of Christ-likeness and says, "I haven't arrived."

How refreshing to hear someone's honesty clothed in humility!

Frankly, we live an imperfect world – we belong to imperfect families – we belong to an imperfect church – this morning you are surrounded by imperfect people.^{iv}

I mean, just look them around you – go ahead . . . don't point . . . just stare.

Paul implies – Let's get real here! And keep in mind that Paul is at the top of his game . . . with rare transparency, he basically admits, I've come a long way, but I've got a long way to go.

That's the first essential attitude – holy dissatisfaction.

The second essential attitude is critical at this juncture of self-evaluation and honesty; let me put it this way – Paul says;

2. **"I am not quitting, I am pressing on!"**

In other words, not only should we get real, but we need to keep moving.

Notice next in *verse 12b, but I press on, so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.*

Paul uses a verb twice here that can be translated to grip or to capture.

You could understand Paul to be writing, "But I press on to capture it – that is, to grow more like Christ – inasmuch as I have been captured by Christ."

"But I press on to grip greater intimacy and consistency with Christ – knowing that I am in the grip of His grace."

In other words, rather than give up and quit after admitting he hadn't arrived – even though at this point he's been serving Christ and suffering for Christ for more than 20 years – Paul's transparent

admission of immaturity combined with his confidence in being gripped by Christ – captured by Christ – compels him to stay in the race.

But I press on – (διωκω) – which means to move decisively toward an objective.^v

Paul used this same word earlier in his testimony to prove how zealous he was to press on in persecuting the church. Can you imagine the change in his life?

Before he was captured by Christ on that Damascus road, he was pursuing and running after the church, but now he is pursuing and running after Christ.^{vi}

Keep in mind, Paul is not talking about chasing down his salvation . . . he's not talking about running after justification – and if I run fast enough, maybe I'll make it into the family.

No, he has been captured by Christ – and now he daily presses on to capture the essence and significance of daily walking with Christ and maturing in Christ and modeling life after Christ.

In fact, Paul uses the present tense here for **pressing on** – I am keeping on in my pressing on.

One author wrote, it's as if he's gritting his teeth and saying, "I will keep at it every day . . . I am in the grip of His grace and I will press on in hot, grasping, pursuit of an ever-deepening walk with Him."^{vii}

I pulled from my file a parable that identified this kind of gritty perseverance. It's a parable, mind you, which means it didn't happen, but it's a story worth telling for the one point that it makes.

It's a parable about an old dog that fell into a farmer's dry well – it was a long fall, but he survived. The farmer came along and after discovering what happened, he sympathized with his old dog, but decided that neither the dog nor the empty well were worth the trouble of saving. So he decided to fill in the well and bury the dog at the same time.

When the farmer began shoveling, initially the old dog was hysterical. But as the farmer kept shoveling and as the dirt hit the back of that dog, the dog just kept shaking it off. It dawned on that old dog that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back what he ought to do is shake it off and step up. This he did, blow after blow. "Shake it off and step up."

No matter how painful the blows or how distressing the situation seemed, the old dog fought panic and just kept shaking it off and stepping up. And it wasn't long before the dog, battered and

exhausted, stepped out over the edge that well and hopped to the ground. What seemed as though it would bury him, ended up benefiting him – all because he kept shaking it off and stepping up.^{viii}

Not a bad attitude to have in the race of life.

I have come a long way, but I have not arrived!

I am not quitting, but I am pressing on!

There's a third essential attitude that leads a runner toward the goal of maturity.

Let me summarize what Paul says with this statement:

3. "I am not narrow minded, but I am single minded!"

And there is a vast difference.

Paul writes in *verse 13, Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do.*

Stop here . . . he'll describe the one thing with a couple key phrases, but don't miss his point of precision and focus.

One commentator wrote of this phrase – like a heat-seeking missile, Paul is locked onto the goal of pursuing Christ.^{ix}

It is the main thing. Listen, the main thing in a Christian's life is to keep the main thing the main thing.

In athletic terms, this means that you minimize the distractions; and narrow the focus.

The 19th century international evangelist D.L. Moody once said, It is better to say, "this one thing I do" than to say, "these forty things I dabble in."^x

Listen, there will always be so many things crowding into your calendar – just make sure they don't crowd out Christ.

In the analogy of the sporting world, no athlete is successful at every sport – he specializes in one sport.^{xi}

In that context, Paul is referring here to his single-minded concentration. He's a runner . . . and he's running after maturing and growing in his knowledge of Christ and commitment to Christ and intimate growth in Christ.

Christianity isn't a smooth race – it's more like running the hurdles.

- one obstacle after another
- one distraction after another
- one refusal by you after another to lose your concentration on the main thing in life.

Someone once wrote, the Christian life is learning the art of refusal.

That's not being narrow minded – it's being single minded.

So let's minimize the distractions that pull us away from this single-minded pursuit of Christ.

Paul says something else here with his fourth essential attitude in running the race – let me paraphrase him in one sentence where he implies:

4. “I can remember yesterday, but I am choosing to move past the past!”

Notice verse 13 again – forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead.

Paul paints here a picture of his one pursuit with two parallel clauses; *forgetting what is behind – and – straining toward what is ahead.*^{xii}

If Paul was the running coach of John Landy, just before the British Empire Games this would have been the perfect locker room speech: “No matter what you do, do not look back over your shoulder – keep your eye on the tape at the end of the race.”

Dwelling on the past is like trying to run with a ball and chain around your ankle.

Imagine Paul's problem – had he dwelt on his past persecution of the church; his misguided passion; his cruelty toward the true children of God.

He never forgot it, but he chose to move past his past.

The problem with the nation Israel in the Exodus was that they forgot the right things and remembered the wrong things. They forgot the power and provision and promises of God and they remembered Egypt. In *Numbers 11* they said, “*We remember the fish which we used to eat in Egypt . . . the cucumbers and the melons.*” (*Numbers 11:5*)

We remember Egypt. Evidently we're not going to remember our escape from Egypt.

Which leads me to say, Paul isn't writing here that we need to forget everything about our past – even Paul didn't; in fact we started chapter 3 with a biography of his life including his persecution of the church.

There are things from your past that causes you to praise God, right?

It's important to remember that Paul is writing in the context of running a race; and he's effectively telling us to forget anything that hinders our reaching forward in the pursuit of Christlikeness.

In the words of one author I read this past week: one way to get ahead is to leave some baggage behind.

In other words, lose *that* baggage behind.

But is Paul asking the impossible? Isn't it true that the more tragic or traumatic or violent or sinful or painful the events of the past, the more likely we are to *never* forget.

Is Paul suggesting that a maturing Christian is in the process of losing his memory?

If that's true, I am definitely maturing. I'm forgetting more and more all the time.

Paul isn't talking about developing spiritual amnesia.

Keep in mind that in Biblical terminology, forgetting something doesn't mean you can't remember it anymore.

To forget in the Bible means “to no longer be influenced or affected by.” Which explains God's promise as the writer of *Hebrews 10:17 records God saying, “And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”*

God doesn't forget anything.

What it means is that God will no longer allow our sins to influence Him or affect Him as to our standing in Christ.

So Paul isn't suggesting some sort of mental or psychological gymnastics where we somehow erase the sins and mistakes and pain of our past – and we all remember them well. Paul is telling us that a runner in the race is able to break free from the power of the past by living for – reaching for – the future.^{xiii}

Listen, we cannot change the past, but we can change the *meaning* of the past.^{xiv}

We can see how God used it to break us, mold us, rescue us, humble us, develop us, and use us today.

This is exactly what Joseph did, recorded in the Book of Genesis.

- he had been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers;
- he had been accused of sexually molesting his boss' wife;
- he had sent to prison on false charges;
- been forgotten by men he served and helped in prison

But then after years of betrayal and suffering and imprisonment, he is released and ultimately becomes the Prime Minister of Egypt – just in time to be used by God to save enough grain to feed the Middle East during a 7 year famine.

And when his brothers come to Egypt to buy grain, he recognized them – but they didn't recognize him in his years and Egyptian dress.

Finally, he reveals who he is to them and eventually delivers to them this sin-shattering, guilt-releasing, God-glorifying statement – *you meant what you did for evil, but God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20)*.

In other words: “I have never forgotten the past – and your evil toward me” – listen, I am convinced Joseph could still feel:

- the horror of being abandoned and sold by his brothers into slavery;
- he could still feel the pain of that long journey into Egypt where he was auctioned off as a slave;
- the crushing blow by Potiphar's wife after he had finally gotten back on his feet;
- I'm convinced he could still smell that jail cell;
- he could still feel the despair of being forgotten time and time again . . .

Joseph effectively said to his brothers, I have never forgotten the past – but I have discovered a different meaning to the past – that my past fit into God's plan for my future.

Paul implies here that you can break the power of the past by giving it new meaning in the light of God's promises and by living for the future.

Don't try to run your race looking over your shoulder – *reach forward* Paul writes – *reaching forward*; the word here in *verse 13 translated “reaching forward”* refers to a runner in a footrace with his hand outstretched, his body bent and straining for the tape.^{xv}

Straining . . . reaching for the finish line.

And what is that future finish line Paul has in mind?

Let me paraphrase one more time – in this fifth and final essential for Christians running their race.

But first, let me quickly review; Paul has first said:

- **I have come a long way, but I have not arrived!**
 - **In other words, get real.**
- **Secondly, I am not quitting, but I am pressing on!**
 - **In other words, keep moving.**
- **Third, I am not narrow minded, but I am single minded!**

- **In other words, stay focused.**

- **Fourth, I can remember yesterday, but I am choosing to move past the past!**
 - **In other words, lose the baggage.**

5. **“I am not expecting the race to get easier, but the prize will be worth it all!”**

In other words, heaven's not here yet!

Notice *verse 14. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

What's the prize? The upward call. What's the upward call? Heaven – and the presence of Paul's Savior whom he longed to know more intimately and walk with more closely.

In the City of Athens, during the days of Paul, I learned that a victorious athlete was given five hundred pieces of money, free meals and front row seats at any theatrical event.^{xvi}

According to Paul, our prize is far greater than money or food or front row seats.

I mean, is that it?

And keep in mind that every one of us, no matter how fast we ran, or how steep the run or how long we were at it – every believer crosses the finish line.

And finishing the race happens to be the doorway of heaven.

- Paul reminds us that the prize is that upward call into the presence of our Lord –
- when our bodies are changed from mortality to immortality; and our spirits and minds are perfected in holiness –
- and we see, the destination of the race – it isn't a promotion or a plaque or a presentation –
- yes, there are rewards, but Paul says here, the prize – the real prize – is a Person – the glorious presence of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

One author challenges the church by writing:

- The prize in Paul's mind is bigger than escaping this world's miseries;
- It is better than never going hungry again;
- Or being free from pain and sickness;
- Or reuniting with redeemed loved ones;
- The best thing about the prize that awaits us at the finish line is not the taste of the food at the Lamb's wedding supper;

- it isn't having tears of sorrow wiped from our eyes;
- it isn't streets of gold or mansions that never need repair or alarm systems;
- The most intense pleasure of heaven is found in the final vision where we shall worship Him and see His face to the glory and praise of God.^{xvii}

It isn't free food and front row seats at a show and money.

It is the prize of the Person of Jesus Christ. Paul effectively writes, "I am running the race . . . toward Him!"

One gospel hymn writer put it this way -

*It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus,
Life's trials will soon be o'er when we see Christ,
One glimpse of His dear face, all sorrow will erase,
So bravely run the race, til we see Christ.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/21/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from CBS Sports archives online & R. Kent Hughes, Philippians (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 148

ii Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 558

iii Warren W. Wiersbe, Philippians: Be Joyful (Victor Books, 1978), p. 94

iv Adapted from Sam Gordon, Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy (Ambassador, 2004), p. 129

v G. Walter Hansen, Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians (Apollos, 2009), p. 251

vi Adapted from Hansen, p. 251

vii Adapted from Hughes, p. 147

viii www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1999/november/12070.html

ix Adapted from Tremper Longman & David Garland, general editors; The Expositors Bible Commentary: Volume 12 (Zondervan, 2006), p. 245

x Gordon, p. 131

xi Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 96

xii Adapted from Hansen, p. 253

xiii Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 98

xiv Ibid.

xv Rienecker & Rogers, p. 558

xvi Gordon, p. 135

xvii Dennis E. Johnson, Philippians (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 217