

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Pressing On Toward the Goal

Philippians 3:12-16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is the nature of the Christian life as a race that must be run to the finish, and the perseverance that genuine faith requires. Paul, near the end of an extraordinary life, declares that he has not yet obtained, is not yet perfect, and must keep pressing on toward a prize still ahead. This directly confronts the presumption of once saved, always saved, the idea that salvation is an automatic, unconditional possession requiring nothing further. At the same time, Paul roots his running in the fact that Christ has already made him his own, which guards against the opposite error of anxious, self-powered striving. Be ready to teach perseverance clearly, salvation is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, and the prize is received by those who finish the race.

This passage is also powerfully formational, because it speaks to two very different people in every class. Some have quietly settled, assuming they have arrived or grown comfortable, and they need to start running again. Others are weighed down by the past, crushed by failures or coasting on old victories, and they need to forget what lies behind and strain forward. Paul's image of the runner, eyes fixed ahead, muscles straining toward the line, is medicine for both. The aim is to get the whole class running, neither presuming nor despairing, but pressing on toward Christ.

So aim at both targets. Establish that the Christian life is a race to be finished and that perseverance is required, against all presumption, and at the same time stir your students to release their past and fix their eyes on the prize, running in the strength of the Christ who has already laid hold of them.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul insists, "not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own" (3:12). What does it teach us about the Christian life that even Paul saw himself as not yet arrived, but still pressing on?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's denial is deliberate and emphatic. After the soaring desires of the previous verses, knowing Christ, his resurrection power, conformity to his death, he immediately guards against any impression that he has arrived. Not that I have already obtained this, not that I am already perfect. The greatest apostle counts himself still in process.

This teaches that the Christian life, this side of the resurrection, is always a pursuit and never a completed possession. There is no spiritual plateau where we may stop climbing, no point at which pressing on becomes optional. Maturity, ironically, is marked not by the sense of having arrived but by the humble awareness of how far there is still to go.

Note the active verb, I press on. The word pictures pursuit, a runner straining, a hunter chasing. Paul does not drift toward maturity, he pursues it with energy. The Christian life is not passive waiting but active pursuit of the Christ who has laid hold of us.

Help students feel both the humility and the hope in this. The humility is that none of us has arrived, the most seasoned saint is still pressing on. The hope is that the race is still open, growth is still possible, and the prize is still ahead. We are neither finished nor failed, we are runners in the middle of the course.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian life as ongoing pursuit, never a completed possession this side of glory
- Maturity marked by awareness of how far there is to go, not a sense of arrival
- Pressing on as active pursuit, not passive drifting
- Both humility and hope in the fact that no one has yet arrived

Discussion Prompts

- Why would Paul, of all people, insist he had not arrived?
- What does it mean that there is no spiritual plateau where we may stop?
- How is the call to press on both humbling and hopeful?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest, in what areas of your spiritual life have you quietly settled, assuming you have arrived or grown comfortable enough? What would it look like to start pressing on again there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question hunts for the places where students have stopped running. Settling is usually quiet and comfortable, not a dramatic abandonment of faith but a gradual cessation of pursuit in some area we have decided is good enough.

Help students locate their plateaus. Often we keep growing in the areas that come naturally and quietly stop in the ones that are hard, a besetting sin we have made peace with, a relationship we have given up on, a discipline we have let lapse, a generosity we have capped. Comfort, not crisis, is the great enemy of pressing on.

Name the danger of settling. What we stop pursuing, we usually begin to lose. The runner who eases up does not hold position, they fall behind. Comfortable Christianity drifts backward even when it feels stable, because the race does not allow for standing still.

Press for one concrete area to resume the pursuit. Ask each student to name where they have settled and one specific step to start pressing on there again this week. The aim is to convert a comfortable plateau back into an active climb in one identifiable place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Settling as a quiet, comfortable cessation of pursuit
- Plateaus forming in the hard areas we decide are good enough
- Comfort as a greater enemy of pressing on than crisis
- What we stop pursuing we tend to lose; standing still is drifting back

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you quietly settled in your spiritual life?
- What hard area have you decided is good enough?
- What one step would start you pressing on there again?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on" (3:13–14). Why is it necessary to leave the past behind, both our failures and our achievements, in order to run the race well?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul names a single thing he does, but it has two faces, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward. A runner who looks back loses speed and stumbles. To run well, Paul deliberately lets the past go, refusing to let it own the present.

Notice that what lies behind includes both failures and achievements. This is crucial. Past failures can paralyze us with guilt and convince us we are disqualified. Past achievements can lull us into pride and complacency, the very settling addressed above. Both kinds of backward looking sabotage the race, and Paul releases both.

Explain what biblical forgetting means. Paul does not mean amnesia or denial. He means refusing to let the past define or detain us. Forgiven failures are not allowed to condemn us, and past victories are not allowed to satisfy us. The past is handed to God so that our energy is free for the road ahead.

Help students see the gospel underneath this. We can release past failures because Christ has dealt with them, and we can release past achievements because our worth rests in Christ, not in our record. The runner whose standing is secure in Christ is free to stop staring backward and to strain toward the line.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Looking back as the enemy of running well
- Both past failures and past achievements as forms of backward looking
- Failures paralyzing with guilt, achievements lulling into pride
- Biblical forgetting as refusing to let the past define or detain us, not amnesia
- Releasing the past because our standing rests secure in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Why does looking back hinder the runner?
- How can past achievements hold us back as much as past failures?
- What does it mean to forget the past without denying it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Which is more likely to hold you back, the weight of past failures and guilt, or pride and contentment with past victories? How does Christ free you to release both and look ahead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to identify their particular form of backward looking. Most people lean toward one or the other, the guilt-prone who are haunted by failures, and the self-satisfied who rest on past victories. Knowing which way we lean helps us guard against it.

For those held by guilt, point to the finished work of Christ. Forgiven sin no longer has the right to condemn or define us. To keep dragging it forward is, in a sense, to distrust the sufficiency of Christ's forgiveness. The gospel frees the guilty to forget what God has already dealt with.

For those held by pride, point to the gospel's leveling truth. Our standing rests on Christ, not on our spiritual achievements, so there is nothing to rest on smugly and no reason to coast. Past victories are gifts of grace, not trophies to retire on. The gospel frees the proud to keep running rather than resting on laurels.

Press for honest self-knowledge and one concrete release. Ask each student which weight is heavier for them, and what it would look like to hand it to Christ this week, a guilt finally released as forgiven, or a victory finally set down so the pursuit can resume.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying our particular form of backward looking
- Christ's finished work freeing the guilt-prone from condemnation
- The gospel's leveling truth freeing the proud from coasting
- Past victories as gifts of grace, not trophies to retire on

Discussion Prompts

- Which holds you back more, past failure or past success?
- How does Christ's forgiveness free you from dragging guilt forward?
- How does resting in Christ free you from coasting on victories?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul presses on "toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14). What is this goal and prize, and what does it mean that our calling is an upward, heavenward call?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul names what he is running toward, a goal and a prize, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. The image is of the games, where the victor was summoned up to receive the award. The prize is not a thing but the full possession of all that God has called us to in Christ, final salvation, the resurrection, eternal life in his presence.

The call is upward, heavenward. This points us to the truth Paul will develop in the next passage, that our citizenship is in heaven. The Christian runs not toward earthly success but toward a heavenly summons, a calling that comes from above and draws us upward to God. This reorients the whole direction of life.

Help students grasp that there really is a prize. The Christian life is not its own reward in a merely circular sense, it presses toward a real consummation, a finish line where Christ himself and the fullness of salvation await. This future hope is not optional decoration on the gospel, it is part of what keeps the runner running.

Note that the prize is in Christ Jesus. The goal is not separable from Christ, he is both the way and the prize, the one who calls and the one toward whom we run. To win the prize is to gain Christ fully, the very thing Paul has been pursuing throughout the chapter.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The prize as the full possession of God's calling: final salvation and resurrection life
- The upward, heavenward call drawing us toward God, not earthly success
- A real future consummation that keeps the runner running
- Christ as both the one who calls and the prize toward whom we run

Discussion Prompts

- What is the goal and prize Paul runs toward?
- What does it mean that our calling is upward and heavenward?
- How does a real prize ahead change the way you run?

Question 6

Student Question:

What is actually the goal you are running toward in daily life? If someone watched how you spend your time and energy, what would they conclude you are pressing on toward?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question exposes the gap between our stated goal and our actual one. Most of us would say we are running toward Christ and his prize, but our calendars and bank statements often reveal a different finish line, comfort, success, security, approval, retirement.

Invite the searching test Paul implies. If an honest observer tracked where the student's time, energy, money, and daydreams actually go, what would they name as the goal of that life? The answer is sobering for most of us, because our true goal is revealed by our pursuit, not our profession.

Help students see that everyone is pressing on toward something. The question is never whether we are running but what we are running toward. Many run hard their whole lives toward goals that cannot survive death, and arrive at the finish empty-handed. Paul runs toward the one prize that lasts.

Press for one concrete realignment. Ask each student to name the gap between their stated goal and their actual one, and one specific way to redirect their time or energy toward the true prize this week. The aim is to bring the daily race into line with the heavenward call.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between our stated goal and our actual one
- Our true goal revealed by our pursuit, not our profession
- Everyone running toward something; the question is what
- Realigning the daily race with the heavenward call

Discussion Prompts

- What would an honest observer say you are pressing on toward?
- Where is the gap between your stated goal and your real one?
- What one realignment would point your energy toward the true prize?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says it is because “Christ Jesus has made me his own” that he presses on to make Christ his own (3:12). How do God’s grip on us and our own effort to lay hold of Christ work together rather than against each other?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This verse holds together two truths we are tempted to separate. Paul presses on to make Christ his own, real human effort, precisely because Christ Jesus has already made him his own, God’s prior grip. The two are not in tension, the second is the ground of the first.

Notice the order, which is the order of grace throughout Scripture. God lays hold of us first. Our pursuit of Christ is always a response to his prior pursuit of us. We run hard, but we are running toward, and held by, the One who first laid hold of us on the road. This keeps our effort from ever becoming self-salvation.

Show how this is the same pattern as work out your salvation, for God works in you, from Lesson 5. God’s action does not cancel ours, it empowers and grounds it. Because Christ has taken hold of me, I have both the security and the motivation to take hold of him. Grace is the engine of effort, not its enemy.

Help students feel the steadiness this gives the runner. We do not run anxiously, wondering if we are strong enough to reach the prize on our own. We run confidently, because the One who holds us is faithful, and we run diligently, because he calls us to lay hold of what he has laid hold of us for. Held and pursuing, both at once.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Our pursuit of Christ grounded in his prior grip on us
- Grace first: God lays hold of us before we lay hold of him
- The same pattern as work out your salvation, for God works in you (2:12–13)
- Grace as the engine of effort, not its enemy
- Running confidently because held, and diligently because called

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Christ’s grip on us fuel rather than cancel our effort?
- How does this mirror working out our salvation while God works in us?
- How does being held by Christ steady you as you run?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where are you tempted either to coast because you assume God will carry you regardless, or to strive anxiously as if it all depends on you? How does this verse correct both?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses verse 12 onto the two opposite errors that live in every class, and often in the same heart at different times. Some coast, presuming on grace and assuming the outcome is automatic. Others strive anxiously, as if their salvation rested entirely on their own performance.

Address the coaster first. Help them see that Christ's grip on us is not an excuse to stop running, it is the reason we can run with confidence. Paul, who knew he was Christ's own, did not coast, he pressed on harder. Presuming on grace is not faith, it is the very complacency this passage rebukes.

Address the anxious striver next. Help them see that the race does not rest on their strength alone. Christ has already laid hold of them, and he is faithful. They run held, not abandoned to their own resources. The antidote to anxiety is not less effort but effort grounded in God's prior and sustaining grip.

Press for honest self-knowledge and one shift. Ask each student which error they lean toward, and what it would look like this week to run as one who is both held by Christ and pressing on toward him, neither presuming nor despairing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two opposite errors: coasting on presumption and striving in anxiety
- Christ's grip as the ground of confident, not complacent, effort
- The anxious striver running held, not abandoned to their own strength
- Neither presuming nor despairing, but pressing on as those laid hold of by Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Do you lean toward coasting or toward anxious striving?
- How does Christ's grip correct the error you lean toward?
- What would it look like to run held and pressing on at once?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul, the great apostle, still speaks of pressing on, straining forward, and reaching for a prize he has not yet attained. How does this passage teach us that salvation is a race to be finished and a prize yet to be won, guarding us against the presumption of "once saved, always saved" while also keeping us from despair, since the One who called us holds us as we run?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it deserves the heaviest treatment, because the passage speaks directly to one of the most consequential errors in much modern teaching. Paul, the apostle who knew Christ as well as any human ever has, refuses to speak of his salvation as a finished, guaranteed possession. He has not yet obtained, he is not yet perfect, he must press on, he strains forward, he reaches for a prize not yet attained. If anyone could presume on an automatic outcome, it would be Paul, and he flatly will not.

Use this to address the doctrine of once saved, always saved directly and clearly. That teaching holds that a person, once truly saved, is unconditionally secure regardless of how they subsequently live, and can never fall away. Paul's whole posture here contradicts it. Why press on, why strain, why reach for a prize, if the prize were already and irrevocably in hand no matter what? The metaphor of the race assumes a finish that must be reached, and Scripture warns plainly that some who began the race do not finish it (1 Corinthians 9:27 speaks of being disqualified; Hebrews 3:12–14 of falling away; Galatians 5:4 of falling from grace; 2 Peter 2:20–22 of returning to bondage after escaping it). Salvation is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, and the crown belongs to those who finish (2 Timothy 4:7–8).

Now guard the other side just as carefully, so that no one hears this as a counsel of despair or a return to earning salvation. The same Paul who presses on also says Christ has made him his own (3:12). We do not run alone or in our own strength. The God who called us upward is faithful, he holds us as we run, and he supplies the power for the running. Perseverance is not white-knuckled survival, it is the faithful continuance of those whom a faithful God sustains. We hold firm to the end, and he holds firmly to us.

Resolve the apparent tension for your class plainly. Assurance and perseverance are not enemies. We can have real confidence, not because our future is unconditionally guaranteed regardless of our response, but because we trust the faithful Christ who has laid hold of us and walk with him day by day. The Christian neither presumes (as though nothing further were required) nor despairs (as though it all rested on our strength alone). We press on with confidence in the One who called us.

Land it pastorally. To the complacent who assume their salvation is automatic, this passage says, keep running, the race is not yet finished. To the fearful who tremble that they cannot make it, this passage says, the One who called you holds you, run in his strength. Both hear the same instruction Paul gives himself, forget what lies behind, strain forward, press on toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as a race to be finished and a prize yet to be won, not an automatic possession
- Against once saved, always saved: Scripture warns the saved can fall away and be lost (1 Corinthians 9:27; Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4; 2 Peter 2:20–22)

- Salvation preserved through ongoing faith and obedience; the crown for those who finish (2 Timothy 4:7-8)
- Christ having made us his own (3:12) as the ground that guards against despair
- Perseverance as the faithful continuance of those a faithful God sustains, not white-knuckled survival
- Assurance and perseverance as allies: confidence in the faithful Christ, not in an unconditional guarantee
- Neither presuming nor despairing, but pressing on in the strength of the One who called us

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul's refusal to claim he has arrived undercut once saved, always saved?
- How does this passage guard against despair as well as against presumption?
- How can a Christian have real assurance without presuming the outcome is automatic?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Paul refuses to coast and refuses to quit, fixing his eyes on the prize ahead. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to form you, to get you running again, to release your past, or to fix your eyes on the goal.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage into one personal response. The passage offers several doors, resuming the pursuit where we have settled, releasing the past that holds us back, fixing our eyes on the true prize, and running held by Christ. Help each student walk through the one Christ is opening.

Press for the specific. Not I want to grow more, but I will resume this discipline I let lapse, or I will finally release this guilt as forgiven, or I will redirect this block of time toward the real prize. The runner's pursuit is concrete, and so must the student's response be.

Hold presumption and despair in view as you close. Some in the class need to stop coasting and start running, others need to stop despairing and trust the Christ who holds them. The same passage speaks to both, and the Spirit will press the needed word on each heart.

Close the lesson in prayer, asking God to get every runner moving again, to free them from the past, and to fix their eyes on the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus. Invite one concrete step this week that turns a stalled or weary walk back into an active pursuit of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gathering the passage into one specific, personal response
- Choosing the particular step over the general intention

- The passage speaking to both the complacent and the despairing
- Turning a stalled or weary walk back into active pursuit of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which door is Christ opening: running again, releasing the past, or fixing your eyes ahead?
- What one specific step will you take this week?
- Do you most need to stop coasting or to stop despairing?