

The Book of Philippians

Lesson 9: Pressing On Toward the Goal -- Philippians 3:12–16

If anyone had earned the right to coast, it was Paul. He had met the risen Christ on the Damascus road, planted churches across the empire, written letters that would shape the faith forever, and suffered more for the gospel than most believers could imagine. Surely a man like that has arrived. And yet here, near the end of his life, Paul says something that should both humble and energize every one of us. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.

Paul reaches for the language of the footrace, an image his readers knew well from the games. He pictures a runner leaning into the track, muscles straining, eyes fixed on the finish line, refusing to look back. He says he does one thing. He forgets what lies behind and strains forward to what lies ahead. The past, both its failures and its trophies, is behind him. What matters is the goal still ahead.

And there is a goal, a real prize at the end of the race. Paul presses on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. The Christian life is not aimless wandering and it is not a finished transaction we can file away. It is a race with a finish line, a calling that summons us upward, a prize worth every ounce of effort the running requires. Paul runs because the prize is real and the race is not yet over.

This passage corrects two opposite mistakes at once. To the person who thinks they have already arrived, who has grown comfortable and complacent, Paul says, not so fast, keep running. To the person crushed by past failures or coasting on past victories, Paul says, let it go, fix your eyes ahead, the prize is still before you. The question for us is simple but searching. Are we still running, or have we quietly stopped, content to drift toward a finish line we assume will take care of itself?

Group Discussion: Paul, near the end of his life, says, “not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on” (3:12). Why do you think even a mature believer like Paul refused to think he had arrived?

Personal Reflection: Paul says he forgets “what lies behind” and strains “forward to what lies ahead” (3:13). What in your past, whether a failure or a success, most tends to keep you from pressing forward in your walk with Christ?

Read Philippians 3:12–16

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, running to win the imperishable prize and disciplining the body so as not to be disqualified; Hebrews 12:1–2, laying aside every weight and running with endurance, looking to Jesus; 2 Timothy 4:6–8, finishing the race and keeping the faith to receive the crown; Hebrews 3:12–14, taking care that no one falls away and holding our confidence firm to the end; Luke 9:62, no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom.