

Title: "I Press On "  
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Text: Philippians 3:12-16  
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## I PRESS ON

Twice in this passage, we hear the words, *I press on* (v.12 &14). We are going to talk about *pressing on* today because it is a biblical theme, and it's essential to every aspect of our spiritual life.

I recently came across the testimony of Doctor Molly Worthen. She holds a Ph.D. from Yale and is a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She had not been a Christian but was studying Christianity as a historian and was surprised to discover she had never really heard the all historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. As she studied the evidences she began to be drawn to faith but also began to realize how many hurdles she had to face and overcome. As she put it and felt at the time, "*there's just so much that seems bananas!*" All the miraculous stories, and the sexual ethic of the Bible that's so at odds with everything our current culture says. She was seeing the weight of evidence for the central truth of Christianity but then dealing with issue after issue that hindered her. She said it can be overwhelming, and so you just have to take baby steps. She came to see that her conversion was a series of epiphanies - moments of God-given insight. She's talking about her journey to faith and describing it as a series of difficulties she encounters but she *presses on* as questions are resolved, ignorance of the evidences for Christianity is replaced by knowledge, bias are overcome and faith emerges.

After her conversion, she went on to talk about her Christian life and described the same thing happening over and over. She said even though she had not been a believer, she *had* been baptized as a baby in a respectable fashion by a man in a dress, so she thought that was enough. Then she came to see that she needed to be baptized as a believer, and she *pressed into* that. She took that step and found it to be a profound experience of faith and grace.<sup>1</sup> Both in her coming to Christ and in her beginning to grow as a Christian, she ran into

obstacles, complications, and uncertainties. But at each point, she kept *pressing on*, and that's really the nature of our spiritual journey from the beginning. It never ends in this life. This passage speaks about it very clearly. It presupposes the danger, the temptation to give up, fall away, coast along, and counters those temptations with a call to keep pressing on, moving forward to what lies ahead.

Throughout Scripture the Holy Spirit uses analogies, images and metaphors to teach spiritual truths. Paul especially was often inspired to use athletic images. This passage is filled with language taken from athletics. **Verse 12** talks about "*pressing on.*" **Verse 13**; "*straining.*" **Verse 14**; *pressing on to win the prize.* These are phrases runners would use about a race. Why this intense athletic imagery? The answer is, God, the Holy Spirit, wants to inspire believers at Philippi, as well as all of us today, to see our spiritual life as a long-distance race in which, if we want to finish well, there are certain things we have to do.

*First,*

## **I. YOU HAVE TO FOCUS ON THE GOAL**

**Verse 14** says, *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

### **A. There is a goal God wants all of us to pursue.**

In one sense there are special, unique ways, God wants to use *you* as an individual, but there is another sense in which God's purpose for us all is the same. In **verses 10-11** Paul described it this way: *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. 11 That by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead. That is the goal!* God wants you to *know* Christ, live in relationship to him, bear up under suffering in faith and hope, dying to self, and in turn experiencing "multiple mini-resurrections," as Barry put it last week. The last two messages have been about this goal.

### **B. This goal we pursue is intimately connected to**

## the grace we've received.

The key to Paul's conviction and passion is buried in the last phrase of **verse 12**. He says; *I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own*. What an image: *Christ made me his own*. Do you ever think of that as the story of your coming to faith in Jesus? Maybe you were in open rebellion against God. Maybe you were indifferent. Maybe you were raised in a wonderful environment, in a Christian home, and at some level, acknowledged or even feared him. But at some point, God, who set his heart on you before the world began, took hold of you and made you his own. This is true of everyone who comes to faith. It's awesome and it means something. Because God is intentional it is inconceivable that he would break into history and make you his own and there not be a goal, a purpose of spiritual wholeness to which he calls you and toward which you are to press on.

Christ wants us all to say with Paul something along these lines; *"I have discovered that Christ made me his own for a purpose, and now I see my life as a long-distance endurance race in which I press on toward the goal to fulfill the purpose for which Christ took hold of me!" If I don't do a lot of other things, by God's grace, this thing I will do: Nothing! Not fame, not money, suffering, setbacks, loneliness, laziness, or anything else is going to keep me from pressing on to know him and become more and more like him."*

*If you allow that to be your focus in life, what you will discover very quickly is that ...*

## II. YOU HAVE TO FACE YOUR SHORTCOMINGS

**Verse 12** says, *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but*. Why does the apostle Paul make a point of confessing his imperfection not once but twice? Of course, he's not perfect. Nobody's perfect. Why does he feel the need to say this?

*It needs to be stated because we need to know this:*

## **A. The courage to clearly face our shortcomings is essential to pressing on.**

Sometimes we humans face disappointments. We grow weary and are tempted to give up on getting better. To get out from under the pressure, we give up. I came across an article recently online under the heading of emotional well-being the author wrote.

I've decided to do something radical: **I will no longer be working to improve myself.**

I'm *done*. I've had enough.

I am about to turn 45, and after a lifetime of diligent effort to improve myself, I still have not achieved most of the things I so long for. And I have hit a wall in my romantic life that I just cannot hit anymore. In the past,.... I would have started a new meditation practice, a new journaling routine.

Today, as I hurtle toward my birthday...I've decided *I'm not going to do a #@&! thing...* I'm not going to lift *one finger* to make myself better. **There was never anything wrong with me in the first place.**

Sometimes we may be tempted, like that, to seek shelter from the awareness of our shortcomings through a radical act of unconditional self-acceptance. That's actually dangerous. There is a better way.

## **B. If we understand the grace God gives us in Jesus, we can face our shortcomings without being devastated by them.**

**Verse 12** says *I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own*. Notice God doesn't want you to be trying to press on out of emptiness or hoping to gain acceptance. In Christ, we're told that we've already been given this grace in which we stand **Romans 5!** Christ has already made us his own, but he's made us his own in order to make us more like himself! He is at work in us and for us in this world. I can face my shortcomings without being devastated by them

and press on because my relationship with him and my identity in him is already established the moment I trust in him as my Savior.

Because he is my Savior, as I come to know him, I discover he is for me, not against me, as I honestly face my shortcomings and sins. Christ didn't hesitate to boldly confront stubborn people who had hardened their hearts, but he was so compassionate with those who were trying but stumbling and struggling. In describing Christ, **Matthew 12:20** quotes **Isaiah 42:5**, which says, "*The bruised reed He will not break, the smoldering wick He will not quench.*" In other words, when He sees you wounded but trying to remain standing, he doesn't break you in impatience. He helps you stand up. When he sees a little spiritual life beginning to glow in your life, he doesn't snuff it out because it isn't a roaring flame; he encourages it. Don't be satisfied with where you are at right now but at the same time, don't fail to rejoice in the bad that has become good and the good that has become better, and the grace in which you stand. *Press on.*"

*Focus on the goal, face your shortcomings then the third thing...*

### **III. YOU HAVE TO FORGET THE PAST.**

**Verse 13:** "*... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,....*" Forgetting doesn't mean obliterating your memory. It means refusing to let the past absorb your attention or impede your progress.

#### **A. Past Sins need to be confessed, and forgiveness received**

**Ephesians 1:7** *In him (Christ received by faith alone) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. 1 John 1:9* promises us that "*...if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*"

#### **B. Past Sorrows need to be released as we live in faith and hope.**

There's a famous devotional titled *Streams in the Desert*. In one place, it speaks about a man who used to sit on a fence overlooking a beautiful field that was just lush and green, and every day, he'd just go out there and enjoy the beauty of this field, and then one day, he came out, and the field had been plowed up. And he thought, "this is terrible. What have they done to my beautiful field?" He was so sad and angry, only to realize later, after it was planted and started to blossom, that the plowing up of the old field yielded something even more fruitful and beautiful. That's a parable of life. To live by faith means, in part, recognizing that sometimes God plows up the old not to leave us with nothing but ugliness but to replenish it, to cause it to flourish in different ways. This is part of the story of the gospel. Out of many mini-deaths come multiple little resurrections into new life.

**C. Sweet memories of the past also have to be put behind us in a healthy way so they don't keep us from pressing on now.**

I heard someone comment that the older people he appreciated and enjoyed the most were people who, when they reminisced about the past with fondness, didn't simply stay stuck in the past. They didn't act as if the past was wonderful, but the present was only disappointing and the future scary. He was encouraged by older people who looked back on the past and saw how God had worked in sweet and in sorrowful times to bring about good things by his grace. They were pressing on in hope.

Runners who look backward don't finish well. Let go of past mistakes you're unable to correct but *have* confessed. Let go of past sorrows that hold you back. Don't let the sweet times behind you keep you from pressing on here right now. Over and over again, we have to Focus on the goal, Face our shortcomings, Forget the past, and go on and Fight to the finish. That's the fourth thing. **Verse 13 & 14**; "*Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*"

## IV. YOU HAVE TO FIGHT TO THE FINISH LINE

It always feels like it would be easier to just check out than to press on. Pressing on requires us to be faithful, coming to be a part of a worshipping church community where we encourage one another, praise God together, and we receive the means of grace together. Faithfully reading our Bibles and praying, giving of our time, money and our service. It means continually bringing our life before Christ and practicing his presence, straining to face our shortcomings with honesty so that we repent of where we've been wrong and rejoice in the grace that not only forgives us but helps us to know him and grow more and more like Jesus.

**A. Jesus said, "Follow me." He is the one who leads us every step of the way as we press on to know him and become like him.**

**Hebrews 12:1-3** says, *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus, the founder, and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

**B. One thing you can be sure of, Jesus Christ understands all about the temptation to quit!**

He agonized in the garden of Gethsemane, and he was tempted to quit, but He pressed on all the way to the cross. Every time the soldiers whip tore his back open, all hell screamed, "Quit!" When he carried his cross to Golgotha, when the nails went through his hands, bystanders ridiculed him, and what seemed a God-forsaken darkness came down as he carried our sins and paid the full penalty for us; all the circumstances screamed: "Quit." But he pressed on until he could say, *"It is finished."* Our sins are serious. We need a Savior. Christ came into our world to lay down his life as a payment for our sins, to satisfy the righteous demands of God's law. His resurrection is the

demonstration that he's paid the penalty and won the victory for us. He offers himself, forgiveness, and eternal life to anyone who will turn to him and trust in him.

We don't press on to earn our salvation. He did that for us. We press on to know him, who pressed on for us and went all the way to the cross to make us his own. *Come to Him! Trust in Him.* There's nothing, absolutely nothing, more important, and no reason to wait. Be glad we follow a Savior who, for your sake and mine, pressed on. Paul has told us in **verse 10** that the goal is for us to be like our Savior. That means we need to press on as well. In **verses 15-16**, *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* <sup>16</sup> *Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*

## Conclusion

It's interesting to think about the fact that Christ doesn't instantly transform us into perfect people when he makes us his own. Why not? It seems that this lifelong process of growing and pressing into knowing Christ it's part of what he wants for us and our pressing on in it is part of the gift that we give to him in gratitude for his grace to us.

I often have reminded you of a story that helps me. It's the story of a teacher in Africa who taught her students that when we give gifts at Christmas, we should do so in celebration of the gift of love God has given us in Jesus. Soon after that, one of the young boys in the class disappeared for several days. When he returned, he brought her a very rare seashell. She knew that for him to get that shell, he had to walk by himself for several days to a certain part of the coast. He had to sleep out under the stars at night. It would have been difficult, dangerous, and scary. She told him: *You shouldn't have done this. That was a long, difficult journey for you.*

And he looked at her and said: *The long walk is part of the gift.* Could you learn to see your life and even the setbacks and struggles you



have to overcome as you press on in the long walk as part of the gift you offer to Christ for the gift of grace he gives so freely to you? Could you decide to see that it is going to be a long walk but that's okay? By offering it all to him as you press on, you fill every moment with significance and purpose.

**Amen**

## A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Holy Father, I admit that my sins are no laughing matter! They are serious offenses. They deserve your righteous judgment. Therefore I thank you from the depths of my heart that, in Jesus, I have a Savior who pressed on through every trial and temptation in order to give himself on the cross as a payment for my sins. I turn from my sins and from my deeply flawed attempts at good works in order to place my faith entirely in Christ, my risen Lord and gracious Savior. Amen

## A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord Jesus, my Savior, and my king, I thank you for taking hold of me and making me your own, and I pray now that this Amazing Grace you've given me will bear fruit in a life of perseverance. Enable me by your Holy Spirit in every necessary and helpful way to forget the things that are behind in order to press on in my pursuit of your purpose in my life so that I might know you and grow more and more like you for your glory and my good. Amen

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1 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/gospelbound/happened-molly-worthen/>