

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.*

¹⁵ *All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.* ¹⁶ *Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

¹⁷ *Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.* ¹⁸ *For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.* ¹⁹ *Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.* ²⁰ *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,* ²¹ *who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Philippians 3:12-21)*

Press On to the Goal!

Every so often when I was a kid, my parents would load us into the car and head for my grandparents' house – four or five hours away. You know what would always happen? Almost as soon as we got onto the highway, we'd begin to ask, "Where are we?" "How much longer?" I'll admit, I was probably the worst offender. We were pretty young and riding in the car for that long was boring. But the whining used to drive my dad crazy. He tried banning those questions and threatening to turn car around and everything else that he could think of. But it didn't have any real effect. We were kids. All he could do was keep driving until we got to my grandparents' house. He had to grit his teeth and press on. And don't we all have to do that? And I don't mean on family road trips. In life, there are so many situations when you just have to grit your teeth and press on. When you're in high school or college and you're tired of writing papers and doing daily work. When you're paying for your house. When you're ten years into that job that hasn't worked out as well as you hoped it would. Often in life, you just have to press on until you reach your goal. And of course, in a far larger sense, that is what life on this earth is all about – as St. Paul tells this morning in his letter to the Philippians. Day by day, in good times and in bad, **press on to the goal!**

I.

The goal, of course, is heaven. That's when all that we've suffered here gets undone. That's when the scales get righted and we finally get to live with God forever. But none of us knows how long we'll have to wait until we get there. We're like young kids who pile into the car to go visit grandma and grandpa, but who have no real concept of how long that trip will take. And the Bible pictures us asking, "How long?" Paul's counsel to us is the best advice we could get on our way to heaven. **Press on to the goal! Forget what lies behind!**

St. Paul wrote these words while he was in prison for preaching the gospel. The letter to the Philippians is an incredible expression of joy and confidence in God by a man who by all rights should have been depressed and frustrated by how unfair life is. In the verses right before our reading, he explains that nothing in this life is more valuable than knowing Christ and his promise of the resurrection. But right after making that point, Paul says, "**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.**" Paul wasn't in heaven yet. We are not in heaven yet. Now, we're not in prison like Paul was, but we are stuck in this world with all that we have to face here. And 2020 has been the kind of year that makes us ask, "How much longer do we have to put up with all this?" "Where are we going?" I read recently that we've experienced five years of change in six months. How much of that change is going to be permanent? In all of that, Christ Jesus has taken hold of us. He chose us from all eternity. He reached into this world and gave us faith. And he is going to bring us home. So rather than whine about how hard it is, Paul urges us to do what he did as he sat in prison: press on to the goal.

How do we do that? Well, Paul says, "**One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me**

heavenward in Christ Jesus.” We press on when we forget what lies behind. What is he talking about? His sins. You know Paul’s history, right? Before he became a believer, he was persecutor. He arrested and imprisoned Christians just for confessing their faith in Christ. As he himself sat in prison, he must have seen the irony that the persecutor was now being persecuted. And you have to believe that when he made trips back to Jerusalem and visited the congregation there, he occasionally ran into people who had suffered because of his actions. There is simply no way that Paul could forget all that, in the sense of wiping those events from his mind.

But he still says that part of pressing on toward heaven is forgetting what is behind. What does he mean? He means that we don’t wallow in our guilt. He means that we trust what Jesus has promised: we are forgiven. St. Paul was a guilty sinner who deserved God’s punishment in hell forever for the horrible things he had done. But Jesus came and lived a perfect life in his place. Jesus came and died and paid even for all the ways Paul had persecuted believers. Jesus wiped all his sins away. Jesus rose and announced that Paul was forgiven.

We are all sinners, too. Most of us have some legitimately bad things in our past, things that you would not want me to announce from the pulpit today. But Paul was forgiven and so are we. Jesus lived in our place, too. Jesus died for the sins that haunt us, the sins that we can’t forgive ourselves for. Jesus paid all that we owe. He rose and announced that we are forgiven. Forgetting what lies behind us means letting go of our guilt because it is forgiven.

Can you imagine having trouble letting go of guilt? If you were arrested and convicted of murder and you were about to be executed, but the governor pardoned you while you were strapped to the electric chair, would you insist on sitting in that chair, waiting for the current to come, even after the guards told you that you were free? Of course not. But when it comes to God’s forgiveness, sometimes we Christians have trouble letting go of our guilt. Sometimes, we insist on punishing ourselves, even though God has told us that he’s not going to. Why? Sometimes, it’s because our conscience is so sensitive. Sometimes, it’s because our memory is too acute – we can’t get the image of what we did out of our head. And sometimes, it’s pure ego. “I did that terrible thing. How can I ever get past that?”

Whatever the reason is, dwelling on the guilt of the past gives the devil a weapon to attack us with. He wants us to question whether we are really forgiven. He wants us to doubt God’s promise. So we have to forget what lies in the past. We have to trust in the word and promise of Christ. We are forgiven. And when we cling to that promise, when we say it to ourselves over and over again, when we depend on it as the cure for the hurt that our own sins have caused our own hearts, we are pressing on toward the goal.

Of course, there are lots of other things in our past that that can damage our trust in Jesus. All the hurts and sorrows we’ve experienced, all the disappointments and defeats scar us emotionally. Just like we can wallow in guilt, we can wallow in hurt and disappointment. Those feelings are real. They’re part of why we need to escape from this life and get to heaven. But in Christ, God has solved all the hurts of this life. When Jesus returns, he will put everything right. Until that day comes, he cares for us and strengthens us through his gospel promises. So again, we forget what lies behind, not in the sense that we pretend like we don’t have those memories. But in the sense that we look forward to the new life where everything will be set right. We look forward to living with Jesus when our hearts will be perfectly healed and even the emotional scars will be gone. That looking forward is what it means to press on to the goal.

II.

Are we able to do that? Leaving the past behind can be hard. Whether we’re talking about guilt or hurt, it can be real challenge to escape from all that. The present can be a real challenge, too, as 2020 continues to show us. But Paul has already given us the key to doing it. My friends, **press on to the goal! Focus on Christ!**

Paul identifies one of the biggest things that keeps us from pressing on to the goal. He says, **“Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.”** Our first thought might be that he’s talking about persecution, which would be fitting for a man in prison for preaching the gospel. But notice what he says about the enemies of the cross of Christ: their god is their stomach. Their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. He is talking about unbelievers here. But what makes them unbelievers? They can’t escape from focusing on this life. What they can see and touch pulls them away from God. So their god is their

stomach. They like the good things in life. They worship them. Their glory is in their shame. He's talking about sinful desires. He's talking about a society that revels in things it should be ashamed of.

It amazes me sometimes how much of what Paul says applies directly to our society two thousand years after he wrote these words. In a world with the internet to fulfill every sinful desire, how many people glory in what they should be ashamed of? And in a society as rich as ours, how many people today worship their stomach as their god? How much time and effort does our society put into having a big house? A great car? All the best foods and all the coolest toys?

Can those attitudes infect us? Sure they can. Every time my wife goes grocery shopping, she asks me what I want her to get. You know what I always tell her? Steak. And more steak. I tell her she should never leave the grocery store without buying steak. Now, I'm joking, of course, but only a little bit. How often don't we get frustrated when we can't afford the things we want in life, whether it's steaks or new cars or the latest gadgets or whatever? Our god is our stomach when our standard of living determines if we're happy or not. And let's not pretend like the internet presents no temptations for us.

That's why we need to focus on Jesus. He lived a life of perfect dedication to God. He didn't need to be rich. He didn't need to experience every pleasure of this life. He needed to love his Father in heaven and to love the people around him. He did that for us. God counts it as works that we did. Then Jesus died and paid for all that's wrong our hearts and all the times that our god was our stomach and all the times our minds were on earthly things. He even died for all the times we gloried in things we should've been ashamed of. His blood washed all that sin away.

In his resurrection, he promised that we will rise and live with him forever. Knowing that changes our perspective on this life. Paul says, **"Our citizenship is in heaven."** He says that we're waiting for our Savior to come from heaven and transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. So what he is saying? Our time down here is like living in a foreign country. It's like the company you work for sends you to work at their factory in some county you never even dreamed of visiting. You don't speak the language. You don't know the culture. You do learn to live there. But you never stop being an American. You look forward to going home. My friends, our citizenship is in heaven and we look forward to going home. But to get there, Jesus has to come and get us. When he comes back, he will transform us. He will make us perfect. He will set us free from all the desires that our sinful hearts have for this life. We will live with him in perfect joy forever.

Focusing on that is pressing on toward the goal. Focusing on Jesus and what he did transforms us now, in a limited sense, but in a real sense. Focusing on Jesus and his love enables us to leave behind the hurts and the guilt of the past and the pressures of the present and the sinful desires that will haunt all our future days here. Those things still exist, but Christ renews our hearts every day and grants us relief until that day comes when he will set us free. Look forward to that day. Focus on Christ and press on toward the goal. Amen.