

February 26, 2023

Stand Firm

Bible Background • Philippians 3:12–4:1

Printed Text • Philippians 3:12–16 | Devotional Reading • Matthew 25:14–29

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: BECOME familiar with what Paul says about living as it relates to eternity with Jesus Christ; APPRECIATE that the journey of Christian living and a quest for something eternal are demanding experiences; and PLEDGE to stand firm in Jesus Christ.

In Focus

Deshawn was confident that he'd be accepted to the Theological School of his choice. His father was the pastor of the church he grew up in so he served in ministry most of his life. He had also been the captain of his high school's Championship-winning Bible Trivia Team.

Deshawn needed a reference letter from the school counselor, but the counselor wanted to meet with Deshawn in person first.

"You have a stellar application, but I am concerned because something important is missing," the counselor said. "In your essay, I see your knowledge, achievements, and accomplishments but what about your personal relationship with God?"

"I never thought about that," said Deshawn, who had been going through life doing what his parents and leaders expected of him. "Is that really necessary?"

"Yes, it is necessary for reasons far greater than this essay, but we'll start here." The counselor said. "Now that you will be going away to college this a good time to begin developing a personal relationship with God. Writing your essay about the beginning of your journey would be a good start."

Developing a strong relationship with Christ prepares us for the relationship we will have with Him in eternity. Paul wanted to encourage the Philippians to please our Lord in their daily lives and stay in the race.

Keep In Mind

"Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing." (Philippians 3:16, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Attained (Philippians 3:12, 16) lambano (Gk.) — Took hold of, or received, such as having received a prize

B. Press (v. 14) dioko (Gk.) — Pursue, follow after, or press forward, work hard, do one's best

Say It Correctly

Apprehend. ap-ree-HEND

Attained. uh-TEYND

Whereto. hwair-TOO

KJV

Philippians 3:12 Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.

13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

15 Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.

16 Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.

NLT

Philippians 3:12 I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.

13 No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,

14 I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

15 Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you.

16 But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.

The People, Places, and Times

Races. To the Greeks of Paul's day, races were very important. After all, this was the culture that had invented the Olympics! Beforehand, the runner spent much time in physical fitness training. A race in those days was in a straight line. The runner followed the line and raced toward the finish line. At the conclusion of the race, the herald proclaimed the winner, and the winner stepped forward to receive the prize—a palm branch and perhaps money. The race was not just a game to the Greeks; only one man could win. In Christ, however, many will win and we hope to be in that crowd.

Background

Before Paul was reaching out to grasp the prize, Jesus reached out to him and grasped him on the road to Damascus. All of us have different salvation stories. We can tell how God was reaching out to us and if we could see things from God's perspective, we would probably realize that He was calling out to us at many times and in many ways before we received Him as our Savior. But God's call to Paul (Saul, as he was called in those days) was quite different. First, God called out to him with a bright light and spoke directly to him. After this, Paul was blinded and was led to the city of Damascus.

For three days, Paul was in this city fasting and unable to see. When the Lord sent Ananias to pray with him, the Lord told Ananias that Paul would bring the name of Jesus before Gentiles, kings, and Jews. This was the task that Jesus had taken hold of Paul to do. Paul did not want to fail in the task that the Lord Jesus had for him. The Lord has grasped each of us for different tasks. We have different things to do at different times of our lives, but we don't want to fail to do those things that the Lord has called us to do. It's a race.

Will we reach the goal that He has set for us?

At-A-Glance

1. Pressing toward the Goal (Philippians 3:12–14)
2. Putting Commitment to the Goal into Practice (vv. 15–16)

In Depth

1. Pressing toward the Goal (Philippians 3:12–14)

After warning them about placing confidence in themselves, Paul proceeded to warn the Philippians about the dangers of false perfectionism. Although Paul strived with all that he had to attain this righteousness, he made no claim to having already achieved it. He emphatically rejected any claim to perfection. He knew from personal experience the dangers of legalism and its tendency to produce a false sense of righteousness. Apparently, some at the Philippian church had deluded themselves with the notion that they were perfect. Paul emphasized that resurrection from the dead was not the only goal ahead. Even the objective that may be achieved in this life still lay ahead. Paul was still running the race. He could not slow his pace; to do so would be like a runner stopping short of the finish line.

Paul does not consider his past achievements to be sufficient. He cannot rest on past accomplishments. The race is unfinished. He must continue to strive to fulfill the call of God that is given through Christ Jesus. Paul's goal is to attain the objective that Christ has set for him. There is a danger in looking back. A runner would surely slow down and probably trip and lose the race. If we keep on looking back at the things we have accomplished, we will slow down as we admire what we have done. Some people look back and worry about the things they did and the things they didn't do. Surely, Paul could have done that. There were Christians who had suffered greatly because of him before he came to Christ. And some of us are always trying to guess whether we have done things wrong, and the worry can surely trip us up. The antidote for that is remembering that worry is the opposite of trust. Paul gives us the answer in verse 13. We need to stop looking backward and just keep our eyes ahead, looking toward Jesus who is waiting for us at the finish line.

Though unattained, perfection is Paul's goal. Admittedly, it is an ambition that one never seems to be able to grasp. Still, Paul is willing to continue to press toward the goal. He has begun the race and is committed to finishing the course. The work he has done so far has been good, but it is not over. As determined as Paul is to finish, he has not yet completed the race. Therefore, he cannot afford to be slack in his efforts. In the meantime, he is concerned with avoiding the illusion of having actually gotten there. Because Christ grasped or took hold of Paul, he, in turn, wanted to grab hold of the perfection, which is Christ's goal for him. Conversion in itself represents the beginning, not the completion, of the goal. Fulfilling God's will has both a beginning and a desired end, but it is a process and a lifetime achievement.

2. Putting Commitment to the Goal into Practice (vv. 15–16)

The King James translation of the word "perfect" in verse 15 appears to be a direct contradiction to Paul's insistence that he is not perfect. What Paul meant here was the evidence of maturity—willingness to admit shortcomings, openness to correction, and willingness to be recreated in Christ Jesus. Those who possess this attitude are those who hold true to what they have attained. The Philippians were admonished to remain true to this point of view so that they could make further progress. They must neither forget the goal nor suffer under the illusion that they have already attained it. Just as there was a danger in assuming perfection had been reached, Paul was well aware, and equally concerned, about those who treated the goal with total disregard.

Search the Scriptures

1. Why did Paul continue to pursue the goal of perfection (Philippians 3:12)?
2. What was Paul committed to doing, even though he had not yet attained the goal (v. 13)?
3. Paul pressed toward what prize (v. 14)?
4. What was Paul's advice to perfect (mature) believers (vv. 15–16)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. God once told Abraham that He is his exceeding great reward. So it is with us—Jesus, Himself, is the prize that we are seeking. We are running the race and Jesus stands smiling at us at the finish line. Just like a child seeking to win first place in order to please his father, we are running the race to bring joy to our Lord. What things does Paul tell us runners that we should do to win the race?

Liberating Lesson

The picture that this Scripture paints of Paul is that he is grasping with all his might. Today, we want to make it easy to follow Jesus. We want Jesus to drop all the material blessings into our laps. We certainly don't want to suffer for Him. Is this the picture we see of Paul in these verses or anywhere else in Scripture? People in other places are suffering for Jesus, but we don't always take this as seriously as we should. How can we turn around our lazy and indifferent attitudes toward our faith in Jesus Christ?

Application for Activation

Write down on a piece of paper the things you need to do to commit your life completely to Jesus. As a reminder, post it on the refrigerator or a mirror in your bedroom.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Philippians 3:12–16

12 Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.

Paul makes it clear that the attainment of the resurrection is in the future. It is something he sets his eyes on but has not achieved yet. This rejects the notion that the resurrection of all believers is

completely achieved the moment one receives Christ as Lord. The resurrection is a reality that should govern our lifestyle after receiving Christ. Paul likely had this in mind when he urged the Church to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12; 1 Corinthians 9:27; 10:12–14; Hebrews 10:26–37; 1 Peter 2:20–22).

Paul says that he has not yet “attained” (Gk. lambano, lam-BAN-o), “laid hold of,” “taken,” or “received” the resurrection. The prize is the resurrection from the dead that is still to come. He has not yet reached his goal; neither is he “already perfect.” The word translated “perfect” is the Greek teleioo (tel-i-O-o) can also mean “fulfill” (Luke 2:43; John 19:28) or “finish” (John 4:34; 5:36; Acts 20:24). This word means completing a given task. What kind of perfection does Paul refer to here? Is it perfection in character? Is it perfection in finishing his course? Some Philippians thought they had reached the goal of Christian perfection. Therefore, Paul wants to let them know that he neither thinks of himself as having “arrived” nor does he see himself as “perfect,” sinless, or holy. This does not imply that Paul was lacking in spiritual experience, that he was deficient morally, or still cleaving to his old nature. But it is another demonstration of his humility. He acknowledges that in all his life, God’s grace is still working. It means also that the task is not yet complete. The race is not over yet. There is still a course to finish to reach the set goal. Hence, he says, “But I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12).

To “follow after” (Gk. dioko, dee-O-ko) means to “run swiftly” to catch a person or thing. It is also translated to “press on,” figuratively used of one that runs swiftly in a race in order to win a prize. There is a sense of urgency and eagerness exerted here. Why is he pressing so hard? He does it so that “I may apprehend” (Gk. katalambano, kat-al-am-BAN-o), or “obtain,” “attain,” “lay hold of” that for which also “Christ Jesus apprehended” him. This word also means “being seized” or “taking possession of.” Paul intimates that Christ had a definite purpose for taking possession of him. The first purpose is probably his call to ministry. Christ told Ananias following His encounter with Paul on the Damascus Road, “He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:15–16; 22:15, 21; 26:15–18).

The second purpose is the attainment of the prize—all that Christ saved him for and wants him to be (3:12). The “prize” to which the Apostle strives could not be salvation itself. For he has stressed that salvation is a gift of God not attainable by human efforts (Romans 3:20–26; Ephesians 2:8–9). God declares us righteous as a free gift activated by faith in Christ’s atoning work. Again, the prize is the satisfaction of knowing he has fulfilled all that Christ saved him for and wants him to be.”

13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, 14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Verses 13 and 14 are more than mere repetition of what Paul has already stated. These verses add emphasis, pointing to the seriousness and the importance of the matter with loving emotion. It seems that Paul, by adding “brethren” (Gk. adelphos, ad-el-FOS), a word of endearment, is invoking his close relationship with the church. Paul is showing a deep concern that they understand the truth he is writing. The use of the word shows that he is deeply moved; he is speaking the truth and would not lie to them. They are to listen to him and take his word for it rather than listen to those who probably claim that they have already reached perfection here and now.

Paul does not consider himself to have “arrived” or to have taken hold of the goal, using again an athletic metaphor. Paul has given up everything for the cause of Christ, renounced his Pharisaic advantages and has identified himself with Christ. However, Paul does not claim that he has reached perfection. However, he says “one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching

forth unto those things which are before" (v. 13). Paul is focused on the race ahead of him and avoiding any distraction from his past to impede his concentration on the prize. He does three things:

1. He is not ruled by the past. A good athlete does not look back when running. Otherwise, he or she would lose speed and, likely, the race itself (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). Jesus cautioned, "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Paul would not allow his past achievements (Philippians 3:5–7) or his failures (v. 6; Acts 9:1) to hinder him from the race. "Forgetting" them means he does not make his past his main focus. How easy it is for our past sins to deprive us of the joy and hope of our salvation. This is the most common weapon Satan uses against the Christian: accusations before the throne. But we have assurance in the finished work of Christ (Romans 8:33–39).
2. He "reaches forth" (Gk. *epekteinomai*, ep-ek-TI-nom-ahee), meaning he "stretches" himself and "strains" every nerve and muscle. Paul spares no energy while using every ounce of his strength to reach the set goal. It is like running the race of one's life as if life depends totally on it. This is the attitude of every good competitive athlete. He does whatever is legally and ethically possible to win.
3. He presses on toward the finish line. The focus of every athlete's eyes from start to finish is the goal. The ultimate prize motivates the athlete to persevere. Paul refers to that prize here as "the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). Professional sports for some athletes today are very lucrative with a handsome reward. In addition to gold, silver, or bronze medals, they are rewarded with millions of dollars in salaries and product endorsements. Many take up acting careers and other endeavors that make millions more dollars. No wonder they train and try very hard to win. These rewards are earthly, perishable, and temporary. For Paul, the reward or prize is not earthly; it is priceless and imperishable (1 Corinthians 9:25). The prize is the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, the upward call of life with Christ. "In Christ" means that Jesus is the context in which the invaluable prize is enjoyed (Philippians 3:14). There are differences between earthly and heavenly races. In the earthly race, the prize is perishable; in the heavenly race, the prize is imperishable. In the earthly race, only one person wins the first prize (1 Corinthians 9:24); in the heavenly race, everyone who believes in the appearing of Christ is a winner (2 Timothy 4:8). On earth, the fastest wins; in heaven, whoever remains on the course, in spite of the time one starts or ends or the pace one runs, wins.

15 Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. 16 Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.

"Let us therefore" demonstrates Paul placing himself on the same level with the Philippians as his kindred (vv. 13, 17). Believers are those who are "perfect," not in sinlessness, or complete in ethical goodness. Rather, it is "perfect" as in mature in the knowledge of Christ. Mature believers are not as children but as those who have been thoroughly instructed and experienced in the ways of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:6; 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28). Paul urges them "to be thus minded" (Gk. *phroneo*, fron-EH-o, see Philippians 2:2–5), to set their minds on the same things he does. They are to imitate his example regarding the things that are behind, and stretch forward to pursue the mark for the prize. He then commits them to divine revelation and instruction. He says, "If in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you" (3:15). That means if any of you are in doubt of anything, are uncertain of your understanding of Christianity, or still have doubts about the Jewish ordinances, God will "reveal" the truth to you. "Reveal" in Greek is *apokalupto* (ap-ok-al-OOP-to), meaning to "take off the cover" or "disclose" what before was unknown. In verse 16, the Greek particle *plen* (plane, "nevertheless") is used as a break in the sentence to emphasize an important truth. Paul urges them to let their conduct be consistent with the level of understanding that they

have attained. Whatever level we are, Paul says, “let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.” Paul stresses the importance of harmony and mutual cooperation in spite of individual opinions on things. The phrase “let us walk,” in Greek stoicheo (stoy-KHEH-o) means to “march in a row,” or to “keep in line.” That means to conform to the standards or established principles.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Be Watchful
(Matthew 24:36–44)

TUESDAY

Be Prepared
(Matthew 25:1–13)

WEDNESDAY

Be Trustworthy
(Matthew 25:14–21)

THURSDAY

Be Compassionate
(Matthew 25:31–40)

FRIDAY

Be Holy
(1 Peter 1:13–21)

SATURDAY

Stand Firm
(Philippians 3:17–4:1)

SUNDAY

Hold Fast
(Philippians 3:12–16)