

“Straining Forward Towards the Goal”
Philippians 3:12–4:1
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I am the shepherding pastor over the young couples at Briarwood. My wife’s name is Elizabeth and we have five sons. I want to tell you a story before we dive into the Scriptures. It’s a story about two bird dogs and a little bird dog. There was an evangelist who lived in Texas who loved to hunt. He had two fine ‘setters’ that he had recently purchased, was training and they were in shape. They were fine specimens of dog hunters and he had them in a cage behind his house. One day while sitting on his porch he saw this bow legged bull dog wobbling down the alley way and there was a little hole in the fence. The evangelist thought he better go save that bull dog and sure enough the bull dog got his tail whipped by those two setters. They made him run out that little hole and run down that alley licking his wounds. The evangelist thought ‘that will teach him and he’ll never be back’ but the next day at the same time that little bull dog was back. He went right in the hole and those setters whip him again and he runs back out of the hole. The evangelist thought maybe he should put his setters in the basement so they don’t hurt that bull dog again but then he thought maybe he’ll learn his lesson.

The next day at the same time and the same place here comes that bull dog who goes through that same little hole. The setters hammer him down and he runs out of that hole down the alley way licking his wounds again. The evangelist had to travel and thought about putting his setters up so as not to hurt the bull dog but then changed his mind and left on his trip. When he got back he asked his wife ‘what is going on with the dogs? Did that little bull dog ever come back?’ She said ‘You probably won’t believe this but at the same time every day that bull dog came back and now when that bull dog sneaks under the fence those setters start whining and goes over to the basement. That little bull dog struts around like he rules the yard.’ That little bull dog had learned something and it’s something I want you to learn from this study as well.

Sometimes it’s not the fight in the dog but the perseverance. He showed up, got whipped but persevered and kept coming back. He kept showing up and I hope the Lord will teach us in this study through His Word what it looks like to keep showing up, to keep pressing on and pressing in toward Jesus Christ. We need to be like that bull dog who although he might get a whipping every now and then but he’s going to show up and eventually he’ll win the day. So let’s start by looking at Philippians 3 and what it looks like persevere and strain toward the goal. This is Paul’s writing.

Philippians 3:12–4:1 says [12] *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* [13] *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,* [14] *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* [15] *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* [16] *Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*

[17] *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.* [18] *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.* [19] *Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* [20] *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,* [21] *who will transform our*

lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

[4:1] Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Lord, speak to us, renew our minds and penetrate our hearts as we come to Your Word. All who are reading this have different things going on in their lives and You Lord know us all perfectly well. Lord, give us insight and understanding of Your Word so that we would be transformed by it, renewed by it, fed, encouraged, strengthened, equipped, sanctified and built up by it. May Your Word have its way with us and Holy Spirit make Christ real to us.

Paul was writing this epistle from a prison and that gives us great perspective because we know he was a man who was nearing the end of his life to a degree so we see into his heart and an understanding what was going on in his mind as he writes this. We see Paul's great love for this church in Philippi and his great desire because Paul had been walking the walk and talking the talk for a while but some of those people were no longer walking the walk or talking the talk there. He doesn't want that same thing to happen to his beloved brothers and sisters there in Philippi.

Recently in the news we have heard of a great pastor who was seemingly walking the walk and talking the talk, this past week deny the faith and is no longer walking the walk. As I read through this passage this past week and heard about this pastor it just pierced my heart because I had benefited greatly from this young pastor's books but he denied the faith. I thought 'what was going on in his personal life?' This passage showed me how to keep running my race with perseverance to win the prize and that's Paul's heart here. Paul did not want these people to give up but to be like the little bull dog who had the tenacity that even though he might get his tail whipped every now and then he was going to keep showing up, to keep fighting the good fight of faith. I want to look at this passage in context so let's go back to chapter 3 verse 8.

Philippians 3:8–11 says *[8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— [10] 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.*

Paul had already received the eternal resurrection for he is not speaking of the day he'll be raised victoriously from the dead but he is speaking of the resurrected life he could live on this earth. He would live a life that was resurrected above the sins of the flesh that easily entangle him and slow him down. He wanted to live as Christ. He wanted to be sanctified and holy like Christ. That is what Paul is talking about in verses 8 through 11.

Philippians 3:12 says *[12] Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* This is the Apostle Paul who had scars on his back to show his love for his Savior. He is the one who had given up all things to know his Savior. This is the man who says I haven't obtained it yet. He is a man who knows he still has to persevere. Even though he is unbelievably mature in his faith and deeply rooted in Christ he is not giving up. He knows there is more to gain, do and his sanctification has a long way to go.

One of the beautiful things I love seeing in the life of Paul is when he writes of the Apostles I am the least. The Apostles are pretty sharp guys. These were men chosen by God to

do some amazing things so these were some pretty holy men. So when Paul says he is of the least there is a little humility there but as you keep reading his writings he says ‘of the saints I’m the least.’ He gets a little more mature here and realizes he is not all that. Then at the end of his life he says ‘of the sinners I am the greatest’ so the closer he got to experiencing and knowing Christ the more beautiful and glorious Christ became to him and the greater he understood his sin. We see it here in this text as well, his understanding of his sin as he says he has surrendered everything but hasn’t attained Christ’s likeness yet. Paul is going to persevere.

Unless we think we’ll reach perfection this side of heaven, Paul is a great example because he did not reach perfection this side of heaven. He still had a long way to go but he pressed on to make it his own. He is not giving up, giving in, slowing down or shrinking back. The picture he gives us here is a runner who is running a race and this runner has certain marks on that course that he is pushing towards. He is not going backwards but straining forwards to reach a life of holiness. That is his desire – to be holy as Christ is holy. This is what Christ died for. He died for God’s glory but He also died for us so that we could be holy. He would not leave us in our sin but transform us into His image so that we could become like Him. Paul understood this and Paul is pushing toward that end as it was a goal of his life. Is holiness a goal of our life and do we understand that this is something God is calling us to?

As I shepherd young men I see them putting a plow to a workforce as they are setting goals in this workforce. They want to be at a certain place by the time they are at a certain age and they continue to plan further goals to reach as they get older. That’s the way certain people are and on the one hand it’s good to strive for great things but is personal holiness a goal in your life that you are pursuing with a great passion? Are you pursuing holiness with the same passion you are pursuing a raise in your job or a promotion?

Paul presses on to make this holiness his own and why does he press on? He says it is because Christ Jesus has made him his own. This is why Paul endured the things he did in his life for he was shipwrecked, put in prison, beaten and so much more. But he knew the One who had purchased him and pressed on to make him His own, therefore Paul would endure to become like Jesus Christ, because Christ was so glorious to him and the Gospel of Christ was so amazing to Paul that he longed for nothing else but to be found in Jesus Christ. Paul says he would give all up to be found for Jesus Christ. Paul pressed on through the shame, suffering and difficulty because Christ did that to purchase Paul so he presses on to be found in Him. Paul was building his life upon the truth of the Gospel and that truth transformed everything else in his life.

Does the Gospel transform and lead us in all of our decisions in life? Do we take all in our life – where we live, what we drive, our finances, our time, etc. – and center it around the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Paul understood that is what was eternal. Do we understand the eternity of the things done for the glory of God? Do we understand the temporal-ness of the things done for the glory of self? Paul understood that the glory of God was his high calling and therefore he was going to press on to be found holy in Christ and to know Him realizing his motivation was due to what Christ did to make him His own. Let’s continue.

Philippians 3:13–14 says [13] *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, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* He was focused on Jesus Christ. Paul did a lot in his pursuit of Jesus Christ. He evangelized, disciplined, preached, and planted churches but the motivation behind all that he did was the glory of God because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He didn’t let the past slow him down for he didn’t let the mistakes of his past bring shame, guilt or condemnation or let his past triumphs puff him up with pride.

Many times when we focus on the past we'll either be paralyzed because of the shame and guilt or we'll be puffed up with pride due to the accolades of things. Paul had an amazing resume of things he could take pride in and amazing things he could be shameful of. He was a persecutor of Christ's church. He didn't focus on his past but he was running a race focusing on the prize that was out in front of him. He kept his eyes on the prize of Christ and strained forward. He pressed on toward the goal of holiness and Christ's likeness. He didn't save us from our sins simply to leave us in our sins but to transform us into His image to be the light and aroma of Christ to the lost so that He could save the lost.

I love the picture of those words – straining forward, pressing on – even in the midst of difficulty Paul moved forward. This world will throw a lot of things at us to slow us down like naysayers, problems, hardships, struggles and difficulties but in all of those things Christ would want us to know that we are overcomers. We are more than conquerors to Him who gives us strength. So we don't look at the obstacles in our path but the Savior who gives us strength and power to overcome the obstacles as we press on and strain forward. Are we pressing on and straining forward to pursue Him, holiness and His likeness in our life? This is His will and desire for us. Do you hear His voice calling you every day to experience Him afresh and anew? He is speaking to us each and every day to come to Him.

Matthew 11:28 says [28] *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Almost every day you can feel weary and heavy laden. I have five sons and every day I'm weary and heavy laden. Christ is calling us to come to Him and God is using my children to sanctify me to be more like Him so I have to enter in daily. I am to be the dad I'm called to be so I have to engage with Him, my wife and them daily. I'm to keep moving forward as I press on and strain ahead.

Staining implies difficult activity. We live in SEC football country and at this time these players have entered into camp. I remember those days as a kid living in Georgia where we couldn't go full pad contact until a certain day. When that day arrived then you could strap on the pads and go full contact but it always seemed to fall in the hottest part of the day, midday in August. You would be sweating as sweat poured down your body. I was a freshman and my brother was a senior and he told me if I wanted to impress the coach to call out this guy's name and as I did I got hammered down but football camp taught us to press on, to endure and to commit to what was ahead. This is the life of Paul to press on to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, that call of holiness. Let's continue.

Philippians 3:15–16 says [15] *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* [16] *Only let us hold true to what we have attained.* He says if you're mature you will understand the call of God to holiness. If you are rooted in Him, growing in Him and mature in the faith then you know that Christ is calling you forward. If you think otherwise then God will reveal that to you. Paul understood that God has to open people's eyes to see the true call of God upon their life.

Has God opened your eyes to His call on your life? Maybe you're reading this today and your eyes have always been blinded to that call to know Christ, be known by Him and then to make known Christ in and through your life. Your ears and eyes have to be open to this by His Spirit. So if your eyes and ears haven't been opened I pray they will be open today to this call and that He would make Himself known to you.

If you know Him, hold true to the truth that Christ has given you. It is so important in our pursuit and pressing on toward holiness that we hold true to the Word of God and to what He has revealed to us. Sometimes we're on the mountain top, as He reveals things to us and we can

see things clearly which we're to hold true to those things because one day we'll be in the valley, in the thick of the fight and this truth is what will get us through as we hold tightly to this truth. Nourish that truth in your life because it is this truth that sets us free and sanctifies us. Build your life on that truth that God reveals to you.

Jesus says in Matthew 7:24–25, [24] *Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.* How do you hold fast to truth? You put it into practice so that when the storms come you will stand firm and move forward. You build your life upon His truth by applying it daily in your life. Let's continue.

Philippians 3:17 says [17] *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.* As we press on to the pursuit of holiness we're do it alongside of those who are in Christ, with the body of Christ. It is with the band of brothers and sisters who are surrounding us. We need mentors and we also need to be mentoring others. We need examples in our own lives of those who are running the race before us.

I love to tell others how Briarwood is a multi-generational church and you get to see, interact and learn from these people who have run their race. If you connect with them they can become mentors to you. It strengthens my soul to see these older people praying with younger people and sharing with them. It's such a blessing to me to see these older people lifting their hands in worship or when I sit in a session meeting and hear the wisdom of the elders. This is what encourages and challenges me to keep running my race with perseverance. As I hear their stories and the difficulties and hardships they have overcome it gives me great hope. We need people like that in our life that we can follow after.

Paul followed after Jesus Christ. We need people in our life that follow after Christ so that we can imitate them and keep our eyes on them. This is the challenge that Paul was giving the church in Philippi and the challenge we are given today. We are not only to have those kinds of men and women in our life but to also be those men and women to others, because someone is watching us. One of the things that keeps me going toward Christ is that I know I have ten little eyes in my house watching me and they see me fail a lot.

Not too long ago I had a day where I had enough of my sons shenanigans and I had basically kicked them out of the house. I had corrected them and told them to get out of the house, with the exception of the smallest one. When my wife came home the boys were crying and they said to my wife, 'Dad hates us, wants us dead and doesn't want to be our father.' Then I thought 'well maybe I overdid it some.' So they now need to see me humble myself and confess my wrong doing. I needed to seek their forgiveness. They were watching. We reconciled and later my 10 year old wrote me a note and in essence said in the note if I wasn't his father he would run away to find me to make me his dad. So they were good with me and I praise the Lord for that but they are always watching me. Those who know you walk with Christ are watching so let's imitate Christ in our lives so they can see Him. Let's walk according to the example that Christ laid out for us and Paul laid out for us. Let's continue in the text.

Philippians 3:18 says [18] *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.* I'm sure if you look around to those who started their journey of faith around the same time you did you could look to see if they are still walking with Christ. I know in my past there are people who now aren't walking with Christ. There are even student leaders back in my days with Campus Outreach that aren't walking with Christ anymore. Many of those summer staff guys I knew are no longer walking with Christ.

Some of them are even enemies of the cross as they lash out at Christianity. These kinds of things are the things that broke Paul's heart when he would see that.

He would see those who were engaged in the game but now were false teachers and it broke Paul's heart not only for the church but for them because he knew the destruction that waited for them. We see Paul's compassion on them as he writes this letter with tears as they have become enemies of the cross. In the next verse he tells us what these people look like. Philippians 3:19 says *[19] Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* Paul knew that hell was real. Their destruction was eternal punishment. So Paul wept for those who were on their way to this end. Do we weep for those who are on their way to this end?

As I read this and thought about Paul it broke my heart that I don't really weep for the lost as I should and it's because I don't understand the eternity of hell. I don't think about it enough or the reality of it and the brokenness and horror of it. I would much rather go merrily down my stream than think of such things yet Paul understood these things. We are to also understand that those without Christ, the enemies of the cross, will face an end of eternal destruction. It should break our hearts and move us to compassionate hearts as we go out and love people toward Jesus Christ.

Another thing Paul says about these people is that their appetites rule them. They have been overcome by the flesh and its appetites. The desires of this life rule them and they long for the things of this world more than the things of Christ. That can trip us up as well. When our eyes get fixed on the things of this world and not Christ then our appetites can start ruling and reigning our hearts and minds. That is not the way Christ has called us to go.

Also what they should be shameful of, they now take great pride in. We see this in our world today where there are those who take great pride in what they are doing that should actually bring great shame. We see people allowing their appetites to rule their actions and this should not be so for believers. Christ should rule our actions and our glory is Him. It is so easy for our minds to get set on earthly things because earthly things clamor for our attention, especially if you own a home. There is something that constantly needs fixing. Your spouse and kids take up a lot of your attention. We live in a fallen and broken world that has a lot of things that need to be done and so we can tend to get caught up in those earthly things but we are to understand what Christ is calling us to, the most important things.

I think of the story of Martha and Mary where Martha was caught up with some temporal things which were good, important things but Mary sat at the feet of Christ. This is what Jesus said to Martha in Luke 10:41–42, *[41] But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, [42] but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."* We too should not get distracted by the earthly things around us or the appetites of our flesh. Paul understood how all these things had choked out the Gospel of Christ in their lives, but not so us. Let's continue in the text.

Philippians 3:20 says *[20] But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.* Christ has entered into our darkness and brokenness and has redeemed and purchased us so that now our citizenship is in heaven. This earth is not our home. We are aliens, strangers, sojourners and pilgrims on this earth. This life is a temporal dwelling but heading to heaven. It's where Jesus said in John 14:2–3, *[2] In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? [3] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.* Heaven is where we are pressing towards because that's our home.

We are to live in light of His return. We long and look for His return. Knowing that He will return gives us great strength and joy to endure, persevere, strain ahead and fight the good fight of faith. If I didn't know that heaven was my home and that He was returning then I would give in to the things of this world. If this world was all there was it would be easy to give into the things of this world but I know by faith, hope and trust in Christ that this world is not my home and that this isn't all there is. I have a home in glory that outshines the sun. Jesus will return one day and take me there and that gives me great joy.

It is just like that little bull dog for even though the days might be tough I'll keep showing up by His grace and for His glory living in light of Christ's return and my citizenship in heaven. Paul is getting ready to balance this out for us because he is calling us to pursue holiness as we run the race with perseverance but then he really knows who is the One who is going to do this in and through us.

Philippians 3:21 says *[21] who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.* Christ is the almighty One. He is the Resurrected One and when He returns with His resurrected power then He will transform me into perfection, true Christ's likeness, true righteousness and true holiness, but until He returns He calls me to keep pursuing it, fighting for it and pressing on. We not to get distracted by the world and those things that would easily entangles us and slow us down. Cast those things off and press forward to make Christ your own. We know that ultimately He is the One who will bring it all to completion.

Christ will not forsake us or neglect us. He knows our struggles and that we are weak here on this earth. I would even say He is longing to return to bring us into His fullness. This whole passage gives me such great hope and joy. Then the last verse of this text in Philippians 4:1 says *[1] Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*

We see Paul's love for the church and the people he was writing to here. He calls them his brothers, beloved who he for and they are his joy and crown. He tells them to stand firm in the Lord. I don't take my stand in my self-righteousness or my efforts or in my abilities to pursue holiness but I take my stand in Jesus Christ, the One who purchased me, redeemed me and is transforming me. He is the One who makes me holy.

Where are you standing? Are you standing on His firm foundation? How do we stand? We stand as Paul told the Ephesians to stand and that's with the armor of God. In Ephesians 6 he challenges them to stand against the schemes of the devil. We don't wrestle with flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil therefore we take on His armor. Every day when we wake up we put on His righteousness, take up His Word and stand with His salvation, His truth and feet that are ready to engage the world in which we live in with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So stand firm so that you can fight the good fight of faith. Press on. Press forward. Don't give up. In a world that screams at you, seeks to distract you, wants to harm you and slow you down remember in Christ Jesus you are more than a conqueror and there is victory. You have a call in Christ so stand in His victory. Keep on looking towards Him and the citizenship He has called you to in heaven. Live in light of His return for one day there will be those words from Him, 'Well done good and faithful servant.' As you do so you will shine like stars in the heavens and will have an impact in the world that the world desperately needs to see.

When we think of the chaos we are facing in the world today we need to stand firm for Christ. We need to pursue Christ's likeness and shine as stars for His glory so that people will see the difference and be drawn towards Him and transformed into His likeness as well. So I

encourage you to press on towards the goal of holiness. Don't give up or give in but keep fighting the good fight of faith. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the opportunity to be in Your Word and work through this passage. Lord, I pray that You would nail down certain aspects of it in our lives, our hearts and our minds so that we would take hold of it and run with it. Lord, help us run with Your truth and allow us to see the world transformed by Your truth. Lord, strengthen us to persevere and that we would find hope, joy, comfort, courage and strength in Christ Jesus. This week may we be reminded of these words in Philippians and of Your calling. Lord may we also be faithful and empowered by Your Holy Spirit bringing glory to Your Name, for I pray this in Christ's Name, Amen.