

Press On | Philippians 3:12 – 4:1

The Rev. Dr. Samuel Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican

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1940 and 1941 were not only some of the hardest years in Winston Churchill's life. They were the hardest two years a Prime Minister of England has ever faced. France had surrendered. London had been bombed. There was the threat of invasion. The U.S. had not yet agreed to get involved. Things were near collapse.

In the midst of this, in October of 1941, Churchill was asked to return to his boyhood school to address the students. Churchill drew from these bleak circumstances a single lesson for the students, stated in three memorable words. Reading from the pertinent section:

*You cannot tell from appearances how things will go. Sometimes imagination makes things out far worse than they are.... But for everyone, surely, what we have gone through in this period—I am addressing myself to the School—surely from this period of ten months this is the lesson: **never give in**, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.*

Never. Give. In.

The message resonates. There's not much honor in quitting. In the face of difficulty, we'd all like to shine as those who endure, who never give in. Many of you know such people. A parent who endured hard jobs to support the family. A sibling who endured cancer. A friend who endured one disappointment after another. And all these, never giving in to despair.

Endurance is not optional for Christian life. It's mandatory. An authentic Christian is a Christian who endures—though not without ups and downs, they keep the faith until their dying breath. And with Christian endurance, more is at stake than national peace:

"If we endure," says Paul "we will also reign with [Christ]; if we deny him, he also will deny us" (2 Tim 2:12).

Christians are to never give in—not to sin, not to fear, not to hopeless despair. Rather, as Paul puts it in memorable words in our passage today, Christians are to *press on*! Using his own example, he writes:

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. (Phil 3:12-14).

Here is the question we will take up today: *How do Christians press on?* What will it take for us to never finally, or fully, give in to sin, despair, or apostasy, but to keep running the course marked out for us. Paul shows us several requirements for pressing on.

I. A Little Grit (vv. 12-14)

First, pressing on requires a little grit—pluck, strength of character, fortitude, toughness—the ability for a Christian to both *absorb difficulty* and *exert effort*. We can see this type of character in Paul.

Text: Paul lives the Christian life with tenacity and resolve. The phrase “**press on**” in verses 12 and 13 comes from a term meaning “**to move rapidly and decisively toward something. To hasten, run, press on.**”¹ In verse 13, Paul says he’s “**straining forward,**” using a word that means “**to stretch out to the uttermost.**”²

Picture someone reaching out their hand for something, as far as they can, straining with the tips of their fingers—and you are near to the mindset, the disposition, of the Apostle Paul. He is one great flexed muscle.

Embedded in this verse is an important Christian truth: in between the Christian’s conversion (new birth) and resurrection, is a stage of the Christian life marked by struggle. It is not a season of perfection, where we have total victory over sin or perfect fellowship with God. “**I have not already obtained this,**” Paul writes in verse 12; “**nor am I already perfect**” (3:12). Rather, it is a season marked by a struggling progress. A moving forward in sanctification, step by step. Paul often uses the image of a race-course, or a fight, to portray the essence of this season of the Christian life.³

And this is why Christian living, in the present, requires grit—the ability to absorb some hardship and exert some effort (show a little discipline).

What Paul has absorbed

Consider the things Paul has had to absorb, the blows he has taken. Paul has experienced Christians behaving badly (1 Corinthians 1, 5). He has experienced the blow of so-called Christians deconverting, abandoning the faith for love of the world (2 Tim 4:10). Paul has been rejected by his kinsmen because of his faith (Rom 9). Paul knows what it is like to follow God’s call only for it to lead to shipwreck, hunger, loneliness, sleeplessness, anxiety, fallouts with ministry partners, humiliation and imprisonment (see 2 Cor 1; 1 Cor 2:1-5; Acts 15; etc.). And Paul has found none of these things as sufficient reason to give in and walk away from Christ.

¹ “διώκω,” BDAG, 254.

² “ἐπεκτείνομαι,” BDAG, 361.

³ see 1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Tim 4:7-8.

Apply: How we do you do with hardships? Does the first sign of suffering tempt you to question God's goodness? Does waiting on God tempt you to walk away from Him? In a culture that prizes immediate gratification and makes "safe zones" for students who generations ago could face war, is not likely to be fostering the quality of grit in us. At least I can say it hasn't done so in me.

How Paul has worked, exerted effort

Consider also Paul's grit by noting how he "works" at his Christian life: He is constant in prayer (Phil 1:3), steadfast in gratitude (Phil 1:3), immersed in God's Word, disciplined in fighting sin (1 Cor 9:27). Paul has even worked at the discipline of "never forgetting about the poor."⁴

Apply: What do you do to work at the Christian life? If someone asked you what you did yesterday to live as a Christian, what would you say? What will you do tomorrow, to live Christianly?

[T] That is the first thing about pressing on—it will require some toughness on our part, some grit. But there is more to pressing on than merely a resolve to be tough. If we are to press on, there also needs to be something we are striving for.

II. A Compelling Goal (v. 14)

Professor Angela Duckworth used to teach math in New York City. She was surprised to learn that sometimes her smartest students weren't the best performers. She set out to understand what characteristics lead to success if it wasn't mere intelligence. Her answer: *grit*. Hence the title of her book: *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*.

What's interesting about her work, however, is that she found that the mere desire to not be bad at something, or to not quit, isn't enough to motivate. Perseverance required that people had something before them they were striving for.

Pressing on requires also having a passion—a goal one is striving for. Which is what Paul says in v. 14:

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (3:14).

Paul is drawing on the image of an athletic race in his day where a post would be place at the finish line. This post—or "goal"—was there so the runners could keep their eyes on it. Get there first and you got the prize.

A Goal Provides Motivation and Focus

Before we ask what Paul's goal was, let's remember the benefit of living life with a goal. A goal—something we are aiming at—gives us motivation to press on through hardships. Even

⁴ "Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do" (Gal 2:10).

more powerful than a resolve to not quit, is a desire to be happy. We will only press on, if we believe that what's before us will truly make us happy.

A goal also provides focus—it helps us know what to focus on, and what to forget about. As Paul says in vv. 13-14: forgetting what lies behind, and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal" (vv. 13-14).

What is Paul's goal, his prize? How does this motivate him. How does it help him focus?

Knowing Christ:

Paul's goal is Christ—to honor Christ in everything, and to enjoy Christ for eternity. This is what "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" refers to. And it is this full knowledge of Christ, and being in the perfect presence of Christ, that Paul has "not yet attained" (v12, 13). Paul began speaking of this goal back in verse 3:8:

⁸ 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.... ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Paul had been won by Jesus Christ, and Christ was his sole aim. Paul had been encountered by Christ on the Damascus road. He heard Christ speak his own name, "Paul. Paul." The glory was such that it knocked him to the ground. From that point on, Christ was the Sun in Paul's universe—everything orbited around Him.

Christ was Paul's motivation:

A calling gives on motivation. When you are in school, it's the students who know what they want to do after school that have the motivation to work hardest while in school. Because of this "upward call of God" (v. 14), Paul's life is flooded with purpose. In every circumstance, Paul sees an opportunity to honor and serve Christ.

Christ was Paul's focus:

This calling to Christ also was a focus for Paul. He was able to see the *point* in all his circumstances—more and more aware of how "everything was working together for good, because he loved Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:28).

E.g., Hiker vs. Hunter: You know that what you're aiming at impacts how you see things? Two people approach a great mountain, one is a hiker the other a hunter. The hiker sees the place to build a trail. The hunter spots the mountain goat high and a ridge. Looking at the same mountain, they see different things because they were *aiming* at different goals.

Just so with Paul: because he is aiming at knowing Christ, he *sees* different things when he looks at this circumstances. Sufferings—these become an opportunity for "fellowship with Christ" (Phil 3:8). Temptations—these become an opportunity to flee to Christ. Confusions—these an

opportunity to trust Christ. Every passing moment is the passing of a highway marker, reminding him that he is speeding toward that day when, as the hymn says, “faith shall be sight!”

Apply: Amid our busy lives, do you not find the invitation to be ultimately about “one thing” both invigorating and relieving? The invitation to draw the cords of our lives into the making of one great tapestry: *life in Christ*. As the Psalmist says, so Paul has come to know:

One thing I have asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord” (Ps 27:4).

When things are hard, rather than kicking against your circumstances, turn to look for Christ *in them*. He is there. You can draw near to him. In your disappointments, lift your head up and look to the hills—your Savior is coming (3:20). Even now, he is preparing a place for you.

[T] Pressing on takes *grit*, and it takes having a *goal*, Christ, to strive toward. Third, it takes guides.

III. A Few Good Guides (v.17)

In verse 17, Paul makes the communal aspect of pressing on clear:

Brothers, join in **imitating** me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. (Phil 3:17).

The Christian life is not meant to be learned nor lived alone. We need mentors and comrades, people around us who model both the emotional pattern and practical techniques of following Christ.

E.g., In the series *Band of Brothers*, you follow the members of Easy Company through years of battle during World War II. As the war wears on, the Company is replenished at times with what are called “replacements.” These are new soldiers who often have no combat experience. Their un-scratched faces are almost an embarrassment beside the war-torn bodies of Easy Company’s veterans.

What is interesting as you watch these replacements settle in, is that even though they have equal or even superior training than members of Easy, they don’t know how to be soldiers yet—not soldiers in combat. They must learn this by *imitating* the experienced soldiers around them.

Paul knows that the mere input of information won’t be enough to teach the Philippians how to live the Christian life. They need examples—veterans, people who have been walking in the way for some time.

And Paul also is aware that if the Philippians aren’t imitating Christians, they’ll end up imitating pagans. Hence his cautionary words in vv. 18-19:

... 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.... (Phil 3:18-20a)

We are imitators; we are all impressionable. Paul is telling us to take stock of who it is that we are mimicking.

Why we have the church

This is one of the reasons that God, in his grace, saves us *into* a people. God's design for his people is that they'd be members of a local church, where they are surrounded by examples and guides.

TFCA: When you really come to know the congregation of TFCA, you realize that there aren't too many experiences that are not represented here. Collectively, we have seen a lot. And when I think of what some of you have been through, and when I think of the faithfulness of all of you to this church, and find it so much easier to press on.

Recently I met with a church member who's been part of TFCA for 43 years. Her and her husband joined in 1979. Imagine all they've seen us through. Building programs, losing buildings, more building programs. Saying goodbye to a 40-year-rector; saying hello to a brand-new, still green, rector. Who knows what all they've been through during these four decades—but they've pressed on, alongside us. I thank God for saints such as this who are among us, people we can "keep our eyes on" as we learn what it means to press on.

I wonder if you have anyone in particular you are imitating in your Christian life? I wonder if you are available to be an example to someone newer in the faith, here in our church?

Sum: What have we said so far? To press on, Christians need a little grit, a compelling goal, and a few good guides. And yet, this list leaves something missing. You read it, and it feels like too much burden is put on your own shoulders. We need to close by noticing one more key to pressing on—not something we do, but something done for us.

IV. Our Guarantor

I have in my pocket a list of things to pray for based on our church's congregational report. It's just a small sampling of the things people in our community and pressing on through: the list includes dear brothers and sisters having surgery for cancerous tumors; miscarriages; heart surgery after a bout with pneumonia; lung cancer; horribly complicated pregnancies; weeks and weeks of radiation. And this is not even to mention the relational pain many are experiencing.

We need more than our own power if we are going to press on. So let me, finally, draw out attention to what is a most comforting phrase in a passage otherwise full of exhortation. Verse 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* (3:12).

Paul understood something that I hope you do to.

- When Christ calls you, he also claims you. “All that the Father gives me will come to me,” Jesus said in John 6, “and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 3:37).
- When Christ calls you, he also sustains you: “we await the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain us to the end” (1 Cor 1:8).
- When Christ calls you, he lives to pray for you: “[Christ] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25)

It is as though the Christian life requires us to jump in water and swim with all our might. But in the end, we find that there is a far deeper current—far beyond our own strength—carrying us home.

Press on, Christian soldiers. And never give in, because Christ Jesus will never give up on you.

Group Questions

1. If someone who knew you were a Christian, asked you about your day yesterday, curious about what you did to live as a Christian, what would you say? What did you do, to live the Christianly yesterday? What unique practices did you undertake to help you press on?
2. You expend energy in so many ways—working, parenting, exercising, worrying—, how much energy to you expend pressing on towards Christ?
3. Paul says he presses on towards Christ by “forgetting what lies behind.” What type of things encumber you and slow you down in your pursuit of Christ? What competing goals? What past sins?
4. Who is your example of the Christian life, your mentor, the person you look to for learning the Christian life? Perhaps you may need to pray for such a person, and humbly ask someone to be this for you. Perhaps you need to be willing to be this for someone else, too.
5. Paul says in 3:20 that “our citizenship is in heaven.” How often do you think about your future life in heaven? How do these thoughts impact your experience of your present life? How might thinking about heaven help you press on?