

A Brilliant Goal

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[0 : 00] Okay, if you're visiting with us tonight, we've been looking at the last couple of Sunday evenings at Philippians. We're going on kind of whistle-stop two or three Philippians, this four-chapter letter or this letter that's been divided into four chapters.

So we're kind of just summarizing the chapter each week just to give you an overview of the book that Paul wrote to this church, this early church of which we know one or two things – we know about one or two of the members by name, people like Lydia and the Philipp – well, we don't know the Philippian jailer's name – but we know him and we have, as we heard Chris's testimony of the season, we have his testimony as well as other leaders who were in the church.

So we're going to – we've kind of focused each week on one verse as it highlights the rest of the chapter. And this evening, the verse that will kind of hinge our thoughts on or broaden our look at the chapter is chapter 14.

Well-known – sorry, verse 14 – well-known words to say, press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes in online interviews with people or you see it now when – sometimes when famous people are being interviewed, occasionally anyway, you see one of the questions will be what would you say to your 16-year-old self?

[1 : 37] You know, it seems to be quite a popular question that people ask. What would you say – you're looking back in your life – to your 16-year-old self? Or what would Chris say to his 16-year-old young self brought up in a religious environment?

Or what would you say to your 16-year-old self? If you were a Christian, what would you say to your own Christian 16-year-old self?

Or what would you say to a young church plant – not a 16-year-old one – a much younger church plant because Paul is speaking here to a young church and he's giving them holy spirit given teaching and advice.

And maybe when you're thinking about a young church, I'm not – I would encourage you not specifically to think of our own church plants like Cornerstone or Esk Valley or Haddington, which probably in some ways are quite different to this kind of church plant because this kind of church plant would be full of completely new Christians.

It wouldn't be like there was a core of believers who moved into an area, who were in an area, and from that base planted a church to grow and to share faith and to see new people coming.

[3 : 02] But these churches were, from the beginning, just brand new Christians. So what would we say to a church that was completely full of brand new Christians?

What would be the focus of what we say? Well, there's a couple of things that I'm going to pick out from – one's broader than just the chapter and one is specific to the chapter, indeed the verse.

But I'm just going to pick out two things this evening quickly. I think it would be very worthwhile to say to any Christian, but particularly to young Christians as well, as they set out on their lives and as they think of who they are and as we think of who we are, who are two important principles for us.

Well, I think the first one is from verse 1 of this chapter, which says, finally, brothers, rejoice in the Lord. Okay? Rejoice in the Lord. So that's the first thing I would say.

That would be – that's always an important principle for us in our Christian lives to have this challenge and this command given to us, rejoice in the Lord.

[4 : 07] And Paul is in this letter to the Philippian church, he highlights this celebratory aspect of faith. It's often called the letter of joy or the letter of rejoicing, even though the circumstances aren't necessarily conducive to joy, certainly not for him.

But there are six times in the letter we have these – this injunction, this command, this encouragement. Rejoice in the Lord, and in two occasions it's repeated. Rejoice in the Lord. And again I say, rejoice. So once in each of the chapters and in two occasions it's repeated. If you have time later on, look them up and look them up in the context of the letter and how they kind of – they become a scaffold for the letter and what comes around it. And so Paul, in each of these occasions where he's been imprisoned, he recognizes the struggle of that but he says rejoice in the Lord. When he's been separated from friends, he knows how tough that is, but he says rejoice in the Lord. When his character has been assassinated, he doesn't take pleasure in that but he says rejoice in the Lord. When he sees serious Christians, Christians seriously falling out – obviously not that serious Christians, but they're Christians seriously falling out, he grieves about that and in the sadness he still says rejoice in the Lord through all of that. [5 : 32] And he has this at the very core of his letter to the church in Philippi. How can that be the case? How can it be the case that he says this?

For us often it seems an unnatural response to the sufferings that he addresses and speaks about. You may think it's simply annoying and unrealistic for a Christian to speak in these terms as if suffering or difficulties or trials or problems can be waved away with a simplicity of a phrase like rejoice in the Lord.

And we know that that can be a frustrating thing to hear. So what is he saying when he says these things? Is he encouraging just a mere stoicism in our lives that suffering can just be ignored by having an attitude of suffering that pain don't hurt?

We know that Paul wept, that Paul was broken, that Paul grieved, that the Bible speaks about these experiences for Christians that fall out in the divisions, the separations and the arguments. He experienced anger in his life. What does it mean for him? What does it mean for us? When we hear these things, you're going through depression. When you're going through difficulty or sadness, what does it mean for us to rejoice in the Lord?

[6 : 58] Well, it does dovetail with what Chris was saying earlier. We didn't cooperate on this. But there is an important principle in our lives that we need to reminded of that our spiritual joy does and is to transcend our circumstances.

It isn't to be circumstantial. When we say, well, God isn't giving me joy, we often think of joy as a response to our circumstances.

He isn't giving me what I've asked for, therefore I'm not enjoying things and my circumstances militate against that. It isn't that. And it will be a battle and a struggle for us if that's the kind of joy we expect.

But rather in verse 20 we have these words, but our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Christ, 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.

So we recognize that this is a foundational reality in our lives, that our suffering is not only time bound within our context here, but it is even redeemable.

[8 : 23] It is something God can use for us in a way that brings purpose to it and direction to it in our thinking because we are His and He is returning because our citizenship is in heaven and all that is happening now is for a purpose.

And He is our Savior and our citizenship whatever happens is in Him. He is our Savior and He will return for us and bring us home.

I mentioned a film this morning and I realized I probably spoiled the story for anyone who hasn't seen it so I'm really sorry about that. I didn't think of that when I was telling the story.

But there is also a link with the theme of the Fatherhood of God that we are looking at a little bit in what we see, the prodigality of the Father this morning.

We recognize also that, plus a theme of a lot of films particularly that Hollywood blockbuster idea of being rescued or someone coming to get us, the best example I can think of is the great film Taken with Liam Neeson.

[9 : 42] Right towards the end of that film his daughter Kim has been hijacked and going to be prostituted. He comes in the most unbelievable way of course to rescue his daughter and she says, Daddy you came for me.

And there's that reality in the whole concept of Christ returning that God is coming back for us and we can rejoice in the security and the safety of that.

If our life is good it prioritizes where we find our rejoicing and who we give thanks to because even that is nothing to be compared with what we have to look forward to.

And if our life is a nightmare with experiences we know we will soon forget that. It will be a forgotten past. And you know that to be the case in our lives at nightmares.

We wake from them and they are quickly forgotten in many ways and so we recognize that we are not yet home and that Christ is returning for us and that our citizenship is with him and it's the foundation for our rejoicing.

[10:57] So that even in this life our every experience of love and of laughter and of belonging and of fellowship and of feasting and of worship it's a foretaste of what is to come.

Therefore we can rejoice even through the tears and even through the difficulties for us. And I do think there's a lack of emphasis on the experience of true rejoicing in our Christianity.

I suspect that may be the case for us. It is true and deep-seated blessedness and happiness we have. We have every reason despite our circumstances to celebrate the glorious transforming love and power of the resurrected Savior who is ours.

So I think rejoicing in the Lord is a really significant and important reality because of what it plugs into and what truth it shares with us in our lives.

The second one is from the kind of the core verse that we have in this chapter. I press on in verse 14 towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God.

[12:11] So the second principle I would share with my sixteen-year-old self is not only rejoice in the Lord but press on, keep on going. And in many ways this is kind of the other side of the rejoicing, not entirely but kind of.

It's the gritty reality that's needed in our faith. And it's the responsibility that we each and every one of us has as Christians in our lives.

No one else can do it for us. Yes, we can be strengthened and encouraged and built up and use the means of grace and all of these things. But not even God can do this for us.

We are asked to press on. The encouragement here for the church was to press on. And it's a verse that really illustrates the Christian faith as a walk.

Not so much a... Well, it can be as often taken as a run, as a race, and it is a race, and spoken of a race. But in many ways it's a walk here, a specific walk of life.

[13:18] We speak about what kind of walk of life you have. And that's really what's been spoken of here. And the book of Philippians and the chapter here of Philippians does highlight two different walks of life.

Ultimately, there are only two different walks of life. However, many variations there might be on these walks and however different characters and personalities and lifestyle.

There's really only two ways in which we can walk in our lives. We either walk away from Christ, or we walk towards Christ.

That's really the only two walks that there are in this world. In verse 18, Paul speaks about those who are not believers.

He says, for many of whom I have often told you, and now will tell you, even with tears, they walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. That's the walk away from Christ.

[14:20] They walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. And Paul speaks about them in this chapter. And as he does so, he does so weeping.

So it's a reason for weeping. It's not a reason for gloating or for being self-righteous when we think about those who are not Christians.

They are spoken of here. They're defined here as enemies of the cross of Christ. That's strong language that's used for those who are not Christians, enemies of the cross of Christ.

And it's strong language, and it's focused language, because it's the cross that is the stumbling block. It's the message of the cross that often will become the final stumbling block that reveals the heart of people to be enemies of God.

It brings what's in our hearts into focus when we are rebelling against God. We don't want the cross of Christ. We don't want what it stands for. We don't want the humility that it requires.

[15:27] We don't want the diagnosis that it makes of our own heart and of our own condition. And so we walk as enemies of the cross if we are not believers, when we were not believers.

And the reality is that he explains this in terms of the walk being like... Remember last week we looked at the mindset of the Christian, the mindset of the believer.

He speaks here about the mindset of the unbeliever, 19b, he says, you know, their end is destruction, their God is their belly, their glory and their shame, their minds are set on earthly things.

So the mindset of the person who walks as an enemy of the cross, who is not submitted to Jesus as redeeming and saviour, is earthly.

Their mind is on earthly things. The philosophy of life, in other words, is earthbound. And you know, we know that from our own experience in the past and we know it's very often from the experience of those who aren't Christians.

[16:28] No place for spiritual realities in their lives, a life for physical pleasures as an end in itself. The glory and their independence away from God, their self-reliance, the dubious freedom of spiritual autonomy and they worship subconsciously, possibly all things material, normal living, normal living for people who aren't those who have come to the foot of the cross.

And the interesting thing is the worst exposition of that, the worst outworking of that is not really out in the streets or in the workplace among secularists, however we want to designate them.

And the worst expression of that can be in the church, the religiously self-righteous. And Paul himself was in that place and he speaks about it in verses 2 to 7 of the chapter.

It's a great irony of the gospel, isn't it, that this earthly walk mindset that is an enemy of the cross can find a really comfortable home in the church and it's a huge danger.

And that was where Paul was in his religiosity before he was met by Jesus on the road to Damascus. He was confident in his own goodness before God, in his religiosity, in his heritage, in his background, in his comparative morality.

[18:04] You know, I had great confidence in the flesh, you know, more than anyone. He was circumcising the people of Israel, tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law of Pharisee, as to zeal, persecutor of the church.

He lists all these things that sets him apart as someone who is really tremendously good and moral in his own understanding, legalistic, judging others, harsh, proud.

Taking it beyond Paul's day for ourselves, you know, when we would maybe look at the message of the cross today and say, well, the cross is great, but the cross is not for me, it's for bad people, it's for other people.

God died for others. My idea of a cross is a bloodless cross, a cross that never plunged God into impenetrable darkness, some kind of other idolatrous cross that is not the cross of the New Testament.

The cross is more like a make-believe kiss and nothing else, a one that allows me to rely on my own self-righteousness. So we see that he exposes it within the church and within society this walk that is earth-bound.

[19:22] And what he does go on to do is expose the end of that road. And it's a difficult verse and it's a troubling verse for us, he says, their mind is set on earthly things, their end is destruction.

One of the two walks, they both have a different destination, they have a different end. And the earth-bound walk away from Christ, its end is destruction.

That's simply what he says. It's a continuation of the spiritual separation from God into eternity. It is not physical death but spiritual death.

It is that facing Jesus who returns on that last great day, he says, and he says, depart from me. I didn't know you. I didn't know you. You've been on the wrong road and there isn't any turning back. I'm scared of that. Not for me, but I'm scared of that truth. I'm scared to think of hell and the reality of that. I'm too aware that people cast it off today as a caricature, as a joke, or take, you know, misunderstandings of what it is.

[20:43] And even within the church, we use it as a threat in a graceless way sometimes. It's a terrible, terrible reality that Paul speaks of here, the end of darkness.

However we express it, being on the outside, being lost, having been deceived. Somehow, somehow today, you need to go from here in your Christian lives and I need to go from mine. And somehow live in such a way that recognizes the seriousness of these things. We live in a world that's no longer scared of hell whatsoever, you know.

No amount of threatening language will change that. We need to think about how we communicate these truths that God says are truth for us, about the end, about the life, about the walk that we are on.

And we also need to pray for a spiritual awakening so that people will see and know and understand the choices they make matter, the way they live, the consideration they have of Jesus matters.

[21 : 47] So there's the two walks, the walk away from Christ and lastly, briefly, the walk towards Christ. And that's the verse we're on, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God.

You know, what do we tell our sixteen-year-old self, Christian self? Press on. A mindset. We say to ourselves and we say to them, we say, you know, it's just really important that you persevere, that you keep on going and that you press on.

This is a resurrection road. This is the power of the resurrection and we share in His sufferings, He says in verse 10. And it's the road in which Christ is the entry point.

The rest, other foundations in life, they're not good. This is the race. This is the road to travel. This is the only road, as it were, there is no other alternative that matches to being on this resurrection road of life.

It's incomparable. We recognize that. He says that Paul came to that recognition when he sought, but all his righteousness that he had and he goes on to say, you know, verse 8, I counted 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.

[23 : 01] It's incomparable. He makes a strong statement. He was willing to give up all the position and power and significance he had because he'd met with the risen Savior and none of the alternatives could match that experience of peace and joy and forgiveness and acceptance moving from death to life and his experience.

Christ has made us his own as we receive His gift. And the encouragement, therefore, to be on this road and to persevere on this road is not to look back, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead.

Great strong words that we have here that Paul uses. There's focus. There's concentration. And I guess this pushes into the idea much more of a race than just a walk, unless it's the walking race in the Olympics.

She's always a bit of a funny race to watch. And I hope we don't walk as funny as people walk in the walking race in the Olympics. Forget it.

But it's something that we let go of failure. We don't concentrate on our failure in the past. We accept we can't change it.

[24 : 16] Forgetting what lies behind. We're released. We're freed. We're not to be paralysed. We're not going to turn back onto a different road. We're looking forward.

We're pressing on. We're longingly looking to recognize who he is. Sometimes I think as Christians, we have a tendency to look back with star-spangled eyes about what our life was like before, even before we became Christians.

And there's just a great example of that in the Old Testament, where we think it was sometimes like it's better to not have been a Christian. It was easier. It was much more fun, much more freedom. We could do what we wanted. We drank what we wanted. We got a party, all these kind of things that we think about. I think it's a much better life as if we're sort of hidebound now that we're Christians and it's such a dull life.

It's a great picture of that in the Old Testament of the people of God who were taken out of slavery from Egypt and then they were taken towards the Promised Land.

[25 : 20] At this point in the desert, in Exodus 11 verse 5, they were grumbling against God, you know? And he says, we are a member of the fish we eat in Egypt that cost nothing and the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic.

They're talking about all this brilliant life that they had in Egypt that they were... God had re-yanked them out of it and they were having a miserable life in the desert. But then if you go back to Exodus 2 verse 23, during those many days the King of Egypt died and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help.

Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. That was the actual reality and yet they had this kind of rose-colored opinion of what the past was like and we can be like that also and he says, forget the past.

Move forward and recognize who press on. Twice he says, press on. We've got a press on. Straining forward. It's the idea of intense endeavor, chasing after, knowing that you're moving forward.

It's the mark of the Christian maturity that we're looking for that we haven't yet made it in the sense of we've still much to learn in our Christian lives.

[26 : 33] We're redeemed and we're saved but we have much to learn, much. And we press on. The challenge every day for you and for me seems endless. We hit the wall, use an athletic marathon illustration, you hit the wall and you can't go on.

Obstacles and pains, he says, press on. Be single-minded. Single-minded in your Bible reading. Single-minded in your prayer. Single-minded in your obedience.

Single-minded in your fellowship. Single-minded in your forgiveness. Pressing on, helping others, encouraging others in that race. We're equipped to do so and the incredible goal, what is that goal pressing on for the upward, the goal for the prize of the upward call.

There's a lot of debate about what the goal and the prize is in theological circles. Some people just think whatever it is, it's the same thing. I tend to suggest that that's the case.

And some of the problems come around from the idea of these words seem to speak of earning that we're earning something and we're earning a prize that we're only doing it to get what we can get at the end.

[27 : 42] But I don't think that was ever the intention of the writers, but rather even the whole idea of reward, prize, reward, goal. It's not about earning something by a life of determination, but rather it's the fulfillment, it's the realization of what we have in Christ.

In other words, Christ is the goal. Christ is the goal we can enjoy now, but we'll enjoy infinitely more as we hear His voice and His calling upwards.

It's that great and divine embrace into the Trinitarian family that we can experience now, but only as a glimpse of what is to come.

We can't imagine how great it will be to be in His company, the company of the One who transformed Paul as the murderous, self-righteous, religious leader of his day into the greatest apostle of the gospel as he met with this Christ.

It's the same kind of reality it will be for us. Press on. If you're the only Christian in your office, press on. If you're only Christian in your family, if you're only the Christian in the city, if you're only Christian you ever know, press on.

[29 : 05] Don't turn back. Don't give up, but press on because of who Jesus is and because of what He has in store for us. Amen.

Let's pray briefly. Lord God, help us to press on. Help us to rejoice at the same time, to rejoice in You, not with a kind of slapstick smile that everyone can see through and that isn't real and genuine, but a real rejoicing that stems from who we have come to know and what He has done and what He does in our lives for us.

Lord, help us to rejoice in You and help us to press on. Give us that persevering spirit, that grit and that determination that Your Holy Spirit instills within us and gives us the ability to move forward.

We pray for each of us here as we go into this working week that we would know Your presence and Your grace and Your blessing, that we'd encourage one another, pray for one another, support one another, help each other in the good times and in the difficult times as well, and that we would be a people who reflect the Christ that we seek to serve.

So help us, we pray, and go before us in Jesus' name. Amen.