

# JOYFULL

KNOWING  
THE  
CONTENT  
LIFE

May 24, 2020

## 1 Thing – Philippians 3:12 – 4:1

### TALKING POINT

We can find joy in pressing on.

Read Philippians 3:12–4:1.

Q: What is the result of focusing on earthly things? What is the result of focusing on heavenly things?

Q: What does it mean to live as citizen of heaven on this earth?

Q: If Paul had not yet reached the goal of spiritual maturity, what does that mean for the rest of us?

Q: Why is our spiritual journey with Christ a marathon and not a sprint?

If Paul, who started most of the churches in the New Testament, who wrote most of the books of the New Testament, who was called by God to be His light to the Gentiles—if he hadn't yet arrived at the goal of spiritual maturity as this point, near the end of his life and ministry, then none of us will be fully mature until we get to heaven. Paul was encouraging the Philippians that even he was still pursuing Jesus, still growing in the knowledge and power of Christ. He calls some of them “mature” (v. 15) but says even he is not “perfect” (fully mature) (v. 12). Even if you have grown, and even if Paul would consider you mature enough for spiritual solid food rather than just spiritual milk, it doesn't mean you're finished growing (1 Corinthians 3:2). Sanctification is not something we ever “finish” on this side of heaven. We will never become as holy as Jesus! But we keep pressing on because we can grow more and more like Him.

Paul was not satisfied with just praying the sinner's prayer, getting his ticket to heaven, and then living the same life he'd had before. He was on a path to heaven—the path of discipleship, pursuing heaven as his goal with all his might—like life is a marathon, and heaven is the finish line. Paul was running as fast as he could toward the goal. The word for “press on” (“pursue as my goal” CSB) means to aggressively chase, like a hunter pursuing his prize catch. It can be used positively (to earnestly pursue) or negatively (to hunt down). This is an even stronger image than just running the race with perseverance. Paul was laser-focused on his goal; nothing else mattered to him (Philippians 1:21).

Paul's whole life was about the relentless pursuit of Christ. Nothing else. Like an athlete training for the Olympic games, every choice he made was about getting him closer to that goal. When Olympic athletes train, they not only practice their sport hours a day, they also take care that everything else they do will not mess up their chance to win. They are meticulous about every bit of food and drink they consume. They don't take chances with risky behavior that might injure their bodies. They make sure they get enough rest, even if their friends staying out late, having fun. They sacrifice other things they could be doing with their time in order to train. With every decision they make, from what time they go to bed, to whether they will eat that chocolate cake, to who they will date, they ask themselves, “Will this help me get to the gold medal?” Every decision. That is how focused and determined they are.

This is the metaphor Paul uses in the next two verses. Gordon Fee writes, Paul uses “an athletic metaphor, picturing himself as a runner whose every muscle and nerve is singularly focused on the goal, in hopes of winning the prize.”<sup>1</sup>

But this prize is beyond any prize any athlete has ever competed for, even in the Olympics, the Superbowl, the World Series, or the Stanley Cup. This prize is eternal life. It is a prize worth fighting for, worth giving your all for, worth giving your whole life for (Matthew 16:26). It is worth everything you have (Matthew 13:44-45).

Paul contrasts this relentless pursuit of Christ with the lives of those who live “as enemies of the cross of Christ” (v. 18). Paul had a remarkably pastoral attitude toward these people; he says this with tears (v. 18). It breaks his heart. In other letters, his weeping is reserved for those who know and follow Christ, so it is most likely that he was referring to people who either were once followers of Jesus but had fallen away or people who were still involved in the church but weren’t really following Christ. Paul lists four things about these enemies of Christ:

- Their end is destruction—This is a play on words with the metaphor of the race. Instead of reaching the “goal” of the finish line of heaven, these people’s race will end in their own destruction.
- Their god is their stomach—“Stomach” is representative of all fleshly desires and cravings. Instead of following Jesus, they are led by their fleshly desires.
- Their glory is their shame—“Glory” is what they delight in; “shame” is how they should perceive their behavior. They delight in things that should bring them shame. This is another play on words, setting up the contrast to our being transformed into the likeness of Christ’s body of glory (v. 21). These enemies are not destined for glory at all. Their end will actually be shame.
- They are focused on earthly things—They aren’t just thinking about earthly things; they’re setting their minds on them, focusing on them, being consumed by them. Their mindset is centered on the things of this world, so their words and behaviors revolve around the things of this world, not the things of heaven. The battle begins in the mind. Instead of running a race towards heaven, they are really just hanging out here on earth.

Paul names these people enemies of Christ. That is a strong declaration! Though they may be members of the church, they do not belong to Christ. As the saying goes, “Just going to church doesn’t make you a Christian. I can sit in a garage all day. It doesn’t make me a car.”

These people do not belong to Christ because they do not follow Christ. Not following Jesus isn’t a neutral position. Paul calls them God’s enemies! Jesus said, “Anyone who is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30). There is no such thing as sitting on the fence with Jesus. You are either for Him, relentlessly pursuing Him toward the goal of eternal life, or you are His enemy. No in-between. Jesus paints a pretty black-and-white picture here.

Of course, pursuing Him doesn’t mean you have to be perfect, do all of it right all the time, or have it all together. Even Paul had a lot to learn and a long way to go. And he made it clear that his righteousness came from Christ, not from his own effort (v. 9). It’s not how well you run the race, but the fact that you are running as best you can, pressing on toward the goal, singularly focused on the prize. To be His follower, you must be following. You must be running the race, setting your mind on things above, following Jesus as your one pure and holy passion. You don’t have to run perfectly. You don’t have to be the fastest or the best. You just have to run as hard as you can, do the best you can, “make every effort” (v. 12). It’s not a competition. Everyone who runs the race gets the prize of eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. From The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 343.

<sup>2</sup>NOTE: There is a verse in 1 Corinthians that says that all runners run but only one receives the prize, but that’s a different metaphor, emphasizing a different thing (1 Corinthians 9:24-26). That verse is talking about the discipline it takes to run the race well, about the attitude of the runner—running like you want to win. This doesn’t mean that our faith is a competition to see who is running the best, but that we should all be giving it our all, like a runner who is trying his <sup>best</sup> to win.

At the end of the chapter, Paul returns to his original point, explaining why the Philippians should follow his example of pressing on toward the goal, focusing completely on following Jesus and throwing off every hindrance (Hebrews 12:1). They should imitate Paul, not because Paul was so great; they should follow Paul as he follows Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul emphasizes the theological point that believers are citizens of heaven walking around on earth. Though the things of earth are all around us, our thoughts, desires, and behaviors should be focused on heaven. Paul had already used this idea of citizenship as a metaphor in chapter one. Remember, Philippi was an official Roman city, so they had full Roman citizenship and legal benefits, a source of great pride and superiority for the Philippians. Paul brings us back to this point again—our citizenship is in heaven. Everything he has said so far points to this idea. You belong to God, not to this world. You are ambassadors of heaven living on earth, sojourners in a foreign land. If you are citizens of heaven, so live like it! In chapter one, he told them to live as citizens worthy of the gospel (1:27).

One day, when Jesus comes back and His kingdom comes in all its fullness, God will make all things new. Even our bodies will be made perfect (v. 20–21). We cannot achieve perfection this side of heaven, but once we are in the kingdom, where there is no sin, suffering, or pain, God will make us perfect. He will make us completely holy. That is when we arrive at “full” spiritual maturity. In the meantime, our churches should be outposts of heaven here on earth. They should look like heaven—places of justice, love, peace, and mercy. Where everyone treats everyone else with God’s lovingkindness. When someone looks at our churches, our homes, and our individual lives, they should see something different about us. We should look like we belong to another world. They should see a glimpse of heaven.

Q: How does being a citizen of heaven affect the way you live today? What would be different about your life if you lived as a citizen of heaven?

Q: If someone looked at your life, your family, and your church community, would they notice that something is different about you, that you belong to a different world? Why or why not?

Q: If the Christian means of sanctification is not to work harder at being holy but to abide in Christ, how do we do that practically? What habits, practices, or disciplines should we be doing to abide in Christ, to set our minds on heavenly things rather than earthly things? What habits or practices should we be getting rid of?

Q: How would your life look different if you pursued Christ with your whole heart, with laser focus?

Q: Why is it important to press on in sanctification, to keep pushing forward?

## APPLICATION

### PRAY

- For the focus to relentlessly press on in following Jesus.
- For God to help you set your mind on things above.

### ACT

**Memorize.** In an effort to set our minds on heavenly things, choose several verses from Philippians to memorize this week. When you are struggling to keep your focus, you can repeat them to yourself, to help you get back on track and press on in pursuing Christ.

- “Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13–14).
- “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).
- “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6–7).
- “My God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).