



# **CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS**

**7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613**

**(319) 277-0924**

**[INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](mailto:INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

**[WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](http://WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

## Living the Jesus Life: Press On

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Philippians 3:12-16 (ESV)

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. 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

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Dear friends:

As we enter the season of spring, some people's thoughts turn to the field of athletics. It's usually track season this time of year. It's fun to watch the jumpers and the shot putters and the javelin throwers do their thing, but the events that I especially enjoy watching are the running events. Whether it's the hundred-yard dash or the long-distance running, I find it very exciting to watch these athletes pushing themselves and straining to put in their best run. Well the apostle Paul takes us to the track in today's passage as he describes his life with Jesus. He uses running and track terms to describe that life. Paul obviously liked athletics, because he refers to them in some of his other letters as well – uses them as illustrations.

Let me quickly set this portion of text up for us before we "take a run" through it. Prior to these verses Paul has written about: since he met Jesus in his conversion, he has set aside counting on personal religious achievements to make himself right with God. He's

let go of those spiritual trophies he built his life upon in order to receive the righteousness and rescue that only Jesus Christ can give a person. He also testified that he wants to spend the rest of his days knowing and serving Jesus and His kingdom cause. His desire is to know the power of Christ's resurrection and his own and to share in his suffering, and he looks forward to standing with Jesus on the great day of resurrection, the grand finale.

Now, in our verses for today, Paul continues this line of thought with this statement: "not that I've already obtained these things," (meaning received), the resurrection of the dead – resurrection day hasn't arrived yet – or "not that I'm already perfect," (and perfect actually means "maturity" here), "but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own." Paul is saying "I know I have not arrived at the resurrection, or to full maturity, in my relationship with Jesus, or in my serving Him effectively." I find this to be a humble, realistic critique of one's life. I haven't arrived, I'm still on the way. And then Paul says again, for emphasis to the folks, "Brothers and sisters, I don't consider that I made it on my own." It's his way of modeling for them the right attitude, he's emphasizing something here:

If I, your teacher, spiritual leader, pastor, one you respect and looked up to, think this way about myself, then you should adopt the same perspective of yourself. Stay away from thinking of yourself as having "spiritually arrived". That's nothing but arrogance and it's prideful and dangerous to your spiritual health. Remember that pride does come before a fall.

Friend, the fact is we never will arrive at full maturity until we're standing with Jesus on resurrection day. Like the crops in the field, we're always ripening for the great harvest to come.

Paul says now, "Though I haven't arrived, I press on to make it my own." Now, this is runners' language. The image given to us is that of a runner who's pressing on, pressing forward, to complete his or her race. This is not a tepid, passive, halfhearted Christianity that Paul's describing for us here. This is an all-out run. The seasoned athlete knows that the race isn't won or lost until the end has been reached, so she keeps running. I remember, earlier on in my adult life, I ran a couple of marathons myself. I found each one to be very tiring and challenging, and even grueling at certain moments, but I kept pushing ahead because I was determined to get to that finish line. Even when I was hardly able to put one foot in front of another, I pressed on until 26.3 miles were behind me. That's the imagery in this statement of Paul's, as he talks about "pressing

on” in the Christian life. Paul goes on to say that as he keeps running to complete his race of faith with Jesus, he maintains a certain focus. He hasn’t arrived, but as he runs he operates with this philosophy in mind: “One thing I do, I run, forgetting first of all what lies behind. I’m not busy turning around and looking back.” You don’t see runners do that, it’s pretty hard to run well when turning your head, isn’t it?

I find that word “forgetting” to be interesting, by the way. Usually you read in scripture the importance of remembering, but this is not the case in this passage. Paul says he’s found value in forgetting some things. You see, it’s easily become trapped and weighed down by looking back at memories of wrongs done to you or wrongs and failures of your own that weigh you down with guilt. It’s easy to get caught up also in one’s past achievements, “the glory days,” which can lead to pridefulness and arrogance, and maybe even coasting, easing up, when following Jesus as His disciple. And Paul says here’s where his focus is, his concentration lies: not looking behind, but straining forward to what lies ahead. I love that image, don’t you? It’s like the runner in the final steps of the race, running full-bore, one hundred percent, with everything she’s got, chest thrust forward, straining to break the tape at the finish line, giving her all. Likewise, Paul says, I’m giving my all in all for my all in all, Jesus Christ.

Now what does that look like, to give your all in all for Christ? Here are a couple of ideas of what that can look like for us as disciples of Jesus Christ. It means I’m committed to spend time getting to know Jesus and His word, the Bible. You see, all of scripture points to Jesus, and it gives us a very rich vision of who He is. In Him we see the fullness of God. And I will never graduate from knowing everything there is to know about Him: His greatness, His wisdom, His grace. There’s always something new to be learned, and admired, and applied to my life. So Bible study is not an elective, but it’s a “must” in the Christian runner’s life. It needs to be our diet. I want to spend the rest of my life getting to know Him, don’t you; experiencing His presence as I obey His word. After all Jesus promised “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is to loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and manifest myself to him.” You see, the discipleship principle is very clear: the poorer our vision of Christ and what He’s done for us, the poorer our discipleship will be. The richer our vision of Christ and what He’s done for us, the richer our discipleship will be as well. And where do we get that vision? In the Bible.

I'm also ready and committed to say "yes" when He provides opportunities to speak the gospel story to someone else. I'm willing to give sacrificial love in His name, even to the most difficult people I might encounter. My life is His life, my possessions, His possessions, my talents, His talents. My number one desire and goal is to make life count for Him. So I'm always on the lookout, always on-call to serve and bring glory. Each day is lived with the attitude "here I am, send me, Lord."

Paul also reminds us that as we give our all running for Christ, there is this glorious end to which we look. He says, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Again, it's an image from the Olympic Games. We have the picture of the finish line and the victors' stand. The victors' stand is where the runner is called up to receive the prize. He receives an "upward call". God will "call us up", Paul says, after we finish our race to receive the prize. But that "prize" is not something that is won by us; it awaits the one who is in Christ Jesus, who trusts in Jesus and what He's done for us at the cross and the resurrection. He's won that prize for us; He ran the perfect race for us, all the way to the cross.

So Paul then moves on and turns to those of us who are reading his words. He gives us an invitation, some encouragement: "So let those of us who are mature think this way," like I've just described. "If you think otherwise, God will reveal it also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained." He's basically saying, "I want you to operate this way, with this mindset, the rest of your lives as you are maturing in the faith. Keep running." "Let's hold true to what we've attained" means, "Stay the course, keep running, hang onto that gospel, stay true to Jesus, saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, pursuing that relationship with Him."

Finally, it's important to note why Paul is so committed to running a good race for Jesus. What drives him, or any Christian, to live life that way; to "press on" for Christ in such a manner? Paul actually does tell us what's the motivator in the opening verse of this passage we read. He says "I press on to make it my own because Christ has made me His own." In other words:

I want to be perfect, mature, because Christ has made me His own. I belong to Him. I want to know Him more and more, and serve Him wholeheartedly, and complete the race for Him to His glory because Christ has made me His own. I'm running for Him, who has won my heart.

Paul is seized by Jesus Christ, who has set him off on a new trajectory in a new life with a new purpose with God. He's not doing all this to try to earn God's love and favor and salvation; he's not trying to get God to love him and let them into His Heaven by running a good race and doing good things. No, no, no! It's because Christ has done something for him already that makes him want to do these things. Christ has made him His own, purchased him with His innocent suffering and death on the cross. Paul's heart has been captured by Jesus Christ. He's been captured by that sacrificial love for the sinner, given at the cross. I've been purchased and redeemed by Jesus; bought with a price. Paul knows that. He says:

I'm captured by His resurrection power and His presence in my life. He's risen from the dead and the first fruits of the resurrection, and knowing that because He lives, I will live also, eternally with Him. And I'll experience the living, risen Jesus who promises to me and all runners, as we place our trust in Him and follow Him, "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

A wise Christian writer, Jim Bjorge, once said:

It's been said that Paul's entire life after his conversion can be summed up with one word: response. "Because Christ has done all this for me," Paul says, "therefore out of love for Him, this is how I am living: running the good race for Him, pressing on. No sitting around."

None of what Paul is describing makes sense to a person until his or her heart has been captured by Christ. Until you realize His love for you, His promises for you, His purposes for you, His new future for you, and you want to follow and know Him and serve Him, all of this sounds just a little bit crazy. Truth is, it's a matter of the heart. Paul's heart was captured by Jesus Christ.

Let me ask you a question today, it's a personal question: has your heart been captured by the Savior Jesus Christ? If so, praise God, press on in your getting to know Him and serving Him in this world. Run with that gospel, my friend. May you be able to say, as the end draws near, the same words of Paul that he said in his last days: "I fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there awaits for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearance."

If your heart has not been captured by Christ, friend, it's not too late. The Jesus life is still awaiting you. He stands knocking at the door of your heart, waiting to be invited

in. A new, abundant, and purposeful God-filled life belongs to those who open that door and let Him in. And wouldn't you like that? It's simply a matter of asking Him to come in and take over your life today. And trust me, when you do that, you're in for the most exhilarating run of your life.

Amen.