

## Pressing towards the Mark

### Read: Philippians 3.12-21.

Paul has told us the goal of his life. How far has he gone towards achieving it?

He hasn't reached it yet, "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (vv. 13-14).

As long as this life continues, Paul knows that his great quest isn't complete. He needs to know Christ more. He knows he is forgiven, but longs for more of the redeeming grace of Christ in all areas of his life. He may be in prison for his faith, but knows that he has still to serve his Lord, no matter what the cost. He affirms that he belongs to Christ – Christ Jesus has already won me to himself. But he knows that he still has a race to run, a prize to attain, and he will continue to press forward to reach it.

Life isn't a sprint but a marathon. It's easy to get distracted. On television we have seen the marathon runner who glances over his shoulder, only to be passed at that very moment. We don't deny the past – either the negatives of our own sins and failures or the amazing grace of God towards us. But God calls us forward – forward to a life transformed into what he always meant us to be. To be spiritually mature, Paul says, is to have this attitude that continually strives to go forward.

Sadly, Paul knows some who call themselves Christians but whose lives make them enemies of the cross of Christ. They aren't moving forward in a disciplined way. Their destiny, Paul is saying, will be destruction, because their god is their stomach – bodily desires... they think only of earthly things.

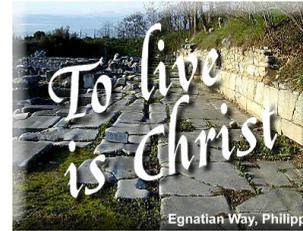
But, Paul says, we are citizens of heaven. We know where we belong. We know our destiny and our goal. We know our Saviour and long for the time when he will change our weak mortal bodies and make them like his own glorious body. We aren't proud of the evidences of our weakness. Our desire and goal is that these be overcome through the power of Christ within us.

#### Reflect:

- Back to where we began – what are our spiritual goals? short-term? long-term? We need to know Christ more and to be transformed by his power – what are we doing about that? How can our faith be translated into action?

## Study 4. Rejoice! Reading: Philippians 4

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## Four Studies on Paul's letter to the Philippians

by Peter J Blackburn

### 3. Pressing toward the Mark

**Reading: Philippians 3**

Sometimes we meet a person who says, "I don't plan or hope for anything. That way I am never disappointed!"

But is that how life is meant to be? We solve our problems by denial. We end up achieving very little.

No, it is important that we have aims and goals. Not just any aims and goals, of course, but the right ones! And it is important that we adopt those strategies that will enable us to achieve them! That is a common-sense approach to most of the ordinary tasks of our life. Things don't get done by themselves without our conscious thought, planning and effort.

This same principle is applicable to our spiritual life as well. In a large measure, our spiritual goals and how we endeavour to achieve them are a sign of where we are in our relationship with the Lord.

#### Reflect:

- How important is it for us to have goals? What are some of our personal goals?
- Where are we going in our relationship with the Lord? What are our spiritual goals?

### Paul's Position before God

#### Read: Philippians 3.1-11.

Paul reveals how he had regarded his life as a good-living Jew. He could point to all his good credentials with truthfulness and pride. Surely God must be pleased with him!

He was circumcised when he was a week old, like every Jewish boy. His parents had been careful about this beginning part of his upbringing and about all that should follow... He was an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure-blooded Hebrew.

Following the great persecution of Jews in the time of the Maccabees, a number of people from other races began to take a great interest in the Jewish religion – there must be something in it if people are prepared to die for it. Some of these people attended the synagogue services as "God-fearers". Others became "proselytes" – undergoing instruction, circumcision and baptism and being

permitted to offer sacrifices in the Temple. Paul wasn't one of these "half-Jews" – he was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews".

He took his religious upbringing with the utmost seriousness. "In regard to the law, a Pharisee". We need to understand something of the background of the Maccabean period – between the Testaments – in which the Pharisee group developed.

Alexander the Great had campaigned to spread the Greek language and culture throughout the ancient world. Following his death, the Hellenistic Empire was divided among his generals. Antiochus Epiphanes had control over the section which included Palestine. He issued an edict that, under threat of death, Jews were no longer to practice their religion. A number of people succumbed, yet "many stood firm and chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant" (1 Macc. 1.41-64).

Little wonder that the Pharisee sect arose with a strong determination to ensure that the whole law be kept, no matter what.

So Paul is saying in effect, "I had a strong and very particular concern to observe all the law". It was because of his in-

**1 Maccabees 1** <sup>41</sup> Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, <sup>42</sup> and that all should give up their particular customs. <sup>43</sup> All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath. <sup>44</sup> And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, <sup>45</sup> to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and festivals, <sup>46</sup> to defile the sanctuary and the priests, <sup>47</sup> to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and other unclean animals, <sup>48</sup> and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, <sup>49</sup> so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances. <sup>50</sup> He added, "And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die."

<sup>51</sup> In such words he wrote to his whole kingdom. He appointed inspectors over all the people and commanded the towns of Judah to offer sacrifice, town by town. <sup>52</sup> Many of the people, everyone who forsook the law, joined them, and they did evil in the land; <sup>53</sup> they drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had.

<sup>54</sup> Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege on the altar of burnt offering. They also built altars in the surrounding towns of Judah, <sup>55</sup> and offered incense at the doors of the houses and in the streets.

<sup>56</sup> The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. <sup>57</sup> Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant, or anyone who adhered to the law, was condemned to death by decree of the king. <sup>58</sup> They kept using violence against Israel, against those who were found month after month in the towns. <sup>59</sup> On the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar that was on top of the altar of burnt offering. <sup>60</sup> According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, <sup>61</sup> and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks.

<sup>62</sup> But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. <sup>63</sup> They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die. <sup>64</sup> Very great wrath came upon Israel. (NRSV)

tense zeal for the law that he actively persecuted Christians. After all that we have gone through, we don't want anyone bringing in new doctrines to lead us away from a strict observance of the law. In fact he claims that "as for legalistic righteousness [he was] faultless".

**Reflect:**

- We find it difficult to understand what made the Pharisees "tick". How would we have reacted to the kind of persecution the Jewish nation had gone through?
- Who are today's "Pharisees"? How can we understand – though disagree – with such people?

"But", Paul says, whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ... I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord".

So what is important for Paul? Knowing Christ, gaining Christ and being completely united to him, having a right relationship (or righteousness) with God on the sole basis of faith in Christ...

In chapter 2, Paul had looked forward to the time when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father". Here Paul lays aside all his credentials and acknowledges the sole Lordship of Christ. From now on his sole glory is what Christ has done for him.

And his goal in life? "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death..." (vv. 10). No longer his spiritual credentials but knowing Christ - restored into personal relationship with Christ because of his death for our sins on the cross.

Paul had suffered as a disciple of Christ - he gives a long list of his personal trials in 2 Corinthians 11.24-26. Jesus warned us, "In this world you will have trouble" (Jn 16.33). He said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil lies against you because of me..." (Mt. 5.11).

Paul accepts that he has suffered and will suffer for the cause of Christ. But his confident goal is that he will experience the power of Christ's resurrection and that he will be raised from death to life.

**Reflect:**

- Christ died for my sin. I am forgiven. But I want to experience the resurrection – the complete overcoming of sin in my present life. Even if I suffer for the cause of Christ, my confident hope is that beyond suffering and death I will experience a resurrection into the life to come. To what extent is this the goal of our spiritual life?