

Paul's Relentless Pursuit

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 October 2019

Preacher: Robin Silson

[0 : 00] This evening's reading is from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 3, starting at verse 12. And in the Church Bibles, that's on page 1180.

So page 1180, Philippians chapter 3, reading from verse 12. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead.

I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us then, who are mature, should take such a view of things.

And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters.

[1 : 18] And just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For as I have often told you before, and now tell you again, even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their destiny is destruction. Their God is their stomach. And their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven.

And we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends. Amen.

Well, good evening. And may I extend my welcome to St. Silas. My name's Robin. I'm a member of the congregation here. And we've got a fantastic chapter of the Bible to look at tonight, the end of chapter 3 in the epistle to the Philippians.

[2 : 38] And so I'm going to pray, and then we're going to look at it together. Father God, we thank you so much for your word, the Bible.

We thank you that it is authoritative over our lives. We thank you that it is inspired by you. And we pray, Lord, that you would help us to listen tonight.

We pray that you'd connect it with our hearts. We pray that you'd transform us, Lord. We pray that you would be present with us now. We ask for your blessing upon us, Lord.

And we thank you that you love us. We thank you that you care about us. We thank you that you care about the ins and outs of our lives, the ups and the downs. And we pray that you'd speak to our hearts and help us to live for you in all we do and say, in Jesus' name.

Amen. When I was a kid, one of the things we used to do was go on loads of walks in the countryside at the weekends.

[3 : 43] Now, for a Bradford lad, that means either going to the Yorkshire Dales or a bit further afield, you can go up to the Lake District. And there's some great places to go if you ever get the chance.

One of the places that is fascinating is a mountain in the Lake District called Helvellyn. Now, I don't know if you've heard of it, but Helvellyn is famous for one of the routes to get to the top called Striding Edge.

If you look on the screen, that's a picture of Striding Edge. It's the really narrow path that you can see. And what they say is that it's the best way to either go up or go down because of the amazing, spectacular views.

However, as you can probably imagine, walking up something like that, it doesn't come without danger. You need to take care with your footing.

And it's a tough walk. Some see it and don't bother. Even the guides, which you're advised if you've not been up to get a guide to lead you up. Say, if you've got a fear of heights or if you're not used to that sort of walk, then you probably shouldn't try it to begin with.

[5 : 02] It's hard. And I mean, you can see from the picture how narrow the path is. I think that there is reports of, you know, tragedies where people have fallen off the edge.

And so it's understandable why people stay at the bottom. And so I suppose there is a choice to make with walking up Hellbellyn or doing hill walking, mountain walking.

Do you want to see these amazing, spectacular views? Do you want to be challenged to walk across this, what looks like a dangerous risk, even though you know beforehand it's going to be tough?

Is it worth the effort? Now, I know we've got a few hill walkers in church. But whenever you attempt something like that, or whenever you attempt something that's difficult, it is the thing that keeps you going.

It is the end goal, isn't it? Like we said, it's the amazing views at the end. It's the end goal that keeps you going. You need to remember that when it's hard work. The Christian life has moments like that, similar to walking up a mountain, where you've got to keep your eyes fixed on the end goal.

[6 : 19] You have to have a sort of spiritual single-mindedness, if you like. It's what the Apostle Paul has. He has a spiritual single-mindedness to reach a spiritual goal.

And if you think about Paul and how his personality comes across, he doesn't do things by halves, does he? You wouldn't say that he was a laid-back sort of a person.

He's intense, he's driven, and he's driven to reach his spiritual goal, to reach his spiritual top of the mountain. And that's what we're going to be thinking about this evening, is the godly pursuit to reach the godly goal.

The spiritual pursuit to reach the spiritual goal, if you like. And we're going to be thinking about that in three points. Paul's relentless pursuit, a dangerous pursuit to avoid and follow the leader.

Paul's relentless pursuit, a dangerous pursuit to avoid and follow the leader. So firstly, Paul's relentless pursuit. But before we jump into our first point, you'll have noticed in our reading this evening, we start in what might seem a slightly peculiar place.

[7 : 41] It sort of seems to occur halfway through Paul's flow of reasoning. Verse 12. Look, if you just look down with me in your Bibles. Verse 12.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal. And the big question, if we're reading this for the first time, is what is the this?

What is Paul's goal? And we've got to ask, what point is Paul clarifying? We have to look back at the verses that come before, in verses 1 to 11, which we looked at last week.

And we saw last week, Paul has been articulating where his righteous standing before God comes from. That it doesn't come from anything he's done.

He puts no confidence in the flesh, we read, in himself. Meaning he puts no confidence in his background, in his family line, in what he's done, in any of his good works.

[8 : 41] He puts no confidence in anything of himself to gain salvation. There is nothing he has done, or will do, that will bring him any saving merit with God.

But the righteousness he has, the stamp of approval from God he has, is something that he has not earned, but received. A righteousness from God that comes through faith.

Paul's boast before God is not in anything that is achieved, but solely based on the righteousness given to him through his faith. He's rejoicing that he has this righteous status.

This standing before the Lord Almighty, approved and commended by him. Because of this righteousness given to him, the pinnacle of human existence, he writes in verse 8, is that he may know Christ.

That he may gain Christ. And be found in him. That is his aim, his goal, that's his spiritual top of the mountain for Paul.

[9 : 50] Now, does Paul know Christ? Yes, he does know Christ. But there's something about it, it's only in part. There is more to come. In a sense, he's experienced only fractions of the true reality that awaits him.

The top of the mountain is in view, but he's not there yet. That's what he means when we look at, just look at verse 12 again. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal.

There are moments going up a mountain when the climb is relatively straightforward. It starts off quite flat.

It's wide. There's no danger. But you can see, if you go back to that photo, if you look at that striding edge, there's times when there's only enough room for single file.

There's drops on either side. There's times when you go up somewhere steep that your calves are burning as you go up steeper parts of the climb. You want to turn back.

[10:56] Just like walking up a mountain is hard, there will be hardships in life. Hardships when the sin seems to cling closely to us.

Hardships when we go through suffering. And the top of the mountain seems barely in sight.

Circumstances where we want to respond, not as we ought.

Spiritually, when our calves are burning. What does Paul do? What does Paul do? Verse 13. But one thing I do.

Forgetting what is behind and straining to what is ahead, I press on. Towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. The goal is to be called upwards.

[11:58] The prize, the top of the mountain, is to be called heaven bound. Paul has the mountaintop view always in place, gaining Christ, and so he presses on. He keeps going.

Now, that aside, the question we might have is, what exactly is pressing on? How does focusing on the goal, the spiritual sort of end goal, of life with Christ, and wanting to know him in his fullness, how does that inform us of how to press on now?

I want to suggest this. If the goal, the object of our pursuit, is to know Christ, to be like him, and we will be, it's worth thinking, from time to time, what will it be like at the top?

How will we be different as resurrected people? I think we can say a few things. Our desires will be what God desires. Our loves will be what God loves.

Our treasure will be what God treasures. Not partially, but fully. And if this is what it will be like, if this is what the resurrected life looks like, what Paul is saying is, the future reality informs Paul of how he should live now.

[13:26] Pressing on means, despite the circumstances, despite the hardships that he's faced, despite the trials, the temptations, the tribulations, pressing on means, in light of what it will be like in the future, love what God loves now.

Desire what God desires today. Treasure what God treasures now. Loving holiness, righteousness, hating sin in this life, and the effects of sin in the world about him.

Pressing on to live in light of what it will be like. Because that's the true reality. That's the true reality. Paul wants us to live like this too.

Paul, he starts in verse 17 with, join together in following my example. And we're going to come to that a little bit later. But what you see, what he does, he also highlights the negative first of what not imitating him looks like.

Which is what we're going to spend a bit of time on as we come to our second point. A dangerous walk to avoid, or a dangerous pursuit to avoid. Now, I've got a little bit of a confession to make.

[14:47] I've never actually been up Hell Valley myself. But, if I ever do, I think I'll do the most sensible thing, which I mentioned earlier, I'll get a guide to lead me up the way.

And, it's true, isn't it? You'd need an experienced, mountain, hill walker, guide to go ahead of you. Someone who knows where the dangerous bits are, where the loose bits of rock are coming, which is the best path to take.

What I wouldn't do, is ask a novice, to be my guide, who'd never been up there. If you're going up a mountain, and choosing a guide, you need to know that they know, how to get to the top.

It'd be totally foolish to ask anyone else. People who don't know, how to get to the top. You'd get in all kinds of trouble, wouldn't you? Take the wrong path, or, you know, he's got a shortcut, that leads to tragedy.

And, if we're honest, some of us would, instead of just taking a guide, we'd like to do it, totally differently. We'd really, just like to take a cable car up there.

[15:53] I mean, that'd be easy, wouldn't it? Just take a cable car, to the top, without putting in, putting in, any effort at all. Now, I know there's lots of mountains, that do have that. And, and that's a brilliant suggestion, if you've got a holiday.

But, there is no cable car at Helvellyn. You have to walk the, the right path, with someone who knows what they're doing. Paul wants to warn us, don't follow those, who think, that they can get to the top, of the mountain, a different way, to the way I'm going.

We either use the wrong path, or think there's an easier way, to the top. There is no other route. And just look with me, what he says, from verse 18. For as I have often told you before, and now tell you again, even with tears, many live as enemies, of the cross of Christ.

Their destiny is destruction, their God is their stomach, and their glory is their shame. Their mind is set, on earthly things.

Now, when it comes to these few verses, there is a bit of a debate, as to who he's referring to, as to who are these enemies of Christ. It makes sense to me, that these are not, the same enemies, that he refers to, in verse 2.

[17:14] We think he's, I think he's referring to, sort of, zealous Jews. I think we see that, because of the descriptions he uses. If you just look at, you can quickly look at verse 2.

He calls them dogs, evildoers, and mutilators of the flesh. Quite, quite strong. Here in verse 18, we do get strong language, but if you look, there is compassion here, that is absent previously.

He says, I think what he's saying is, these are people who, they started out on the right path, but they've now chosen a different one.

They've gotten their understanding, mixed up, of what it means to be a Christian. And it's Christians whose pursuit, it now doesn't match his. They don't press on in the way he does, and they try to do it their own way.

Let's look, what characterizes their actions? Firstly, their God is their stomach. Now, he doesn't mean that they love their Sunday roast a bit too much, but what he means is that they are navel gazers.

[18:27] They're bent inwards, looking at themselves, concerned only about how the world affects them. Secondly, their glory is in their shame.

The very things that are shameful in God's eyes, sin and the like, they have got, it suggests that they've got used to it. They abuse the freedom they have, and they take great pride and glory in doing it.

Joy in committing sin, and assuming that God's free gift of grace still covers them. Thirdly, we see that it says, their mind is set on earthly things.

It means that their purpose, their goal, is truncated. It has fallen short. It has lost sight of the top of the mountain. It's a small vision that's based on the temporary, on the earthly, looking to the things of the world to satisfy.

It could be the life that has all the right spiritual jargon, all the right words on the outside, but the life that we see represented looks no different to the way the world lives.

[19:43] It's a dangerous pursuit, fraught with danger, and we see why. Paul says, their destiny is destruction. It's not just that they're not headed to the top of the mountain.

Their destiny is destruction, and they are enemies of the cross. I think one of the ways that we might see the relevance of this today, and maybe what Paul is sort of hinting and describing, is the attitude where people want the freedom that comes from having Jesus as saviour.

What I mean by that is they want the forgiveness, the righteous standing, but they don't want or even cringe at wanting Jesus as Lord.

They don't want to change the way they live, and consequently abuse that gospel freedom. Abuse it to do whatever they want.

As a get-out clause, I know Jesus doesn't want me to live like this, but it's fine because I'm forgiven. I can do whatever I want.

[20:58] Paul is pretty strong. Paul says, to live like that is to live as an enemy of the cross. Why? Because it's not what Christ dies for. He sets you free from the power of sin.

You're free from sin so as not to do it. Not to do whatever you want and presume on his grace. Walking like that makes you an enemy of the cross.

It's very strong. I want to suggest just on another, on a, the warning from Paul here is to not follow people like that.

Okay? The warning people is don't, if you see somebody who's living like that who says they're a Christian, don't follow them. Okay? But I think it hits home as well if, if you're living like that. If you sin and think, oh well, it doesn't matter, does it? God, Jesus has forgiven me, hasn't he? I've got the stamp of, of approval. If you, if you're thinking like that, be very careful.

[22 : 11] Be very careful if you become complacent with sin and indulge in it and self-justify and think, it's alright, doesn't matter, does it? If that is your staple diet of Christianity and repentance, turning away from sin, is missing, if grief over your sin is absent, it might be time to examine yourself and your understanding of the gospel.

Paul says, don't be like that. And he says, don't follow people like that. Thirdly, follow the leader. Follow the leader. Back to our thinking about the mountain. I said before, if we want to get to the top of the mountain, we want a safe guide.

A guide that can be trusted, who knows the way. Someone to imitate. You need to follow in his footsteps so that he can turn around and say, what's your step? Warn you about upcoming climbs. He knows when the steep bits are coming and can give you a Mars bar. And he can take great confidence in a group leader like that. The one you imitate has done it all before.

[23 : 30] That's Paul. That's Paul here. Paul says, follow my example. But interestingly, I think, he doesn't just say he's the only one to look at, to keep as a model.

Just look with me in verse 17 again. He says, join together in following my example, brothers and sisters. And just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. He's not making it exclusive to just imitate him, but others. He says, us as a model there, doesn't he? If you think in this letter, there is others.

We've got Timothy that we've heard of. We've got Epaphroditus in the letter. We can look at, I suppose, the Philippi, he was saying to the Philippian church, look at them. Look at these guys. They're doing the same as me as well.

Imitate them. But he also says, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. He broadens this out to anyone who lives like he does.

[24 : 31] there are loads of Christians. We heard, we're having this heavyweight section every week when we look at heroes of the faith who've lived like Paul did.

And it's not limited to historical figures either. Paul says this about himself and Timothy and Epaphroditus when they're all still alive. There are Christians amongst us.

Look at our church family. People sat here tonight who are worth imitating. Because they live godly lives. They press on for the upward call.

If you know someone who's like that, we're not saying they're sinless. Paul isn't saying that about himself either. But we are noticing that their attitude is in pursuit of God, in pursuit of gaining and knowing Christ Jesus.

Imitate how they live. Watch how they make decisions based on biblical wisdom. Watch how they respond to hardship and suffering. And you know when you see a godly response.

[25 : 39] I don't know, have you ever had that experience when you've been with a brother in Christ, another Christian, and the godly way they react is so sort of different.

It's almost shocking to you. I remember once talking to a good friend of mine, and he's telling me a story about someone else in the church that he was meeting up with, and they were working through something together, a particular issue.

And I thought at the time innocently said, who's that then? And he said, I can't tell you that. You know that would be gossip.

Now, that's only a small thing, but it took me aback. I just expected him to tell me straight away who he was talking about. There is something straight away that speaks of, that is a godly way to talk about someone.

And, you know, the right way, and we think about how that might affect me when the next time I have that opportunity when I'm talking about someone else. With those things, just take note of the godliness of those around you, and when the time comes and you're in the same situation, emulate the godliness.

[26 : 50] Follow those who've taken the lead. We think about hardship. Hardship will, we know hardship will happen to all of us. We'll all go through suffering at some point.

And I just want to say as I'm talking about this, it is okay to grieve, it's okay to mourn, it's perfectly normal to cry when we go through these things. And I just thought we could remember, you

remember Job?

He loses his whole family. Was he sad? You bet he was, grief stricken of course. We read he tore his robe, he shaved his head, he fell to the ground.

And you'd expect that sort of reaction wouldn't you when he's lost his whole family. What are the first words that come out of his mouth? naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. May the name of the Lord be praised, is what he says.

[27 : 56] Now I read that and I think, blimey, that is a man who, what faith he had. That is a man who is pressing on.

Imitate those who know how to get to the top of the mountain. The life we are to emulate, it's in total contrast isn't it, to the navel-gazing enemies of the cross.

Total contrast. We don't look inwards, but upwards, not to the temporary earthly, but the eternal and heavenly. And he sums it up for us at the end, doesn't he, the motivation why.

Our citizenship is in heaven. Our citizenship is in heaven. That's the upward call. To be truly and fully a citizen of heaven.

But he said it, the way he uses it, he talks of it in the present. We are citizens in heaven. Do we know that today? Do we know that today? We belong to heaven.

[29 : 07] Whatever citizenship it says on your passport, I know we're all not born in the UK, but here is something that unites all the believers in Christ. Whatever it says on your passport, that's of no eternal value, but this is your citizenship, our citizenship is in heaven.

That's where you belong, that's home, that's the top of the mountain and it's why we press on. Do you ever have that experience when you've been away from home for a while and all you want is like your own bed and like a cup of tea in your favorite mug and you're just like, I can't wait to get home to just enjoy those home comforts.

or maybe like your family cooking or there's something about just being at your home that just, there's something warm and nice about that. If we feel that about our own homes today in an earthly sense, imagine when you're truly home.

When you're truly home and you can, you're where you're meant to be and you can say, I'm home. I'm home.

No more lowly, you don't have a lowly body, more you've got a glorious body. The upward call to be with him where he is, becoming like him as he is. Emulate Paul.

[30 : 35] Imitate the godly attitude of the Christians you know. Learn from them how to press on because heaven is at the top of the mountain. Let me pray.

Lord God, we just praise you and thank you so much for all you've done for us.

We thank you for that righteous standing that we have before you, that stamp of approval, that we're approved and commended by you. we thank you that you've made us like yourself but we thank you that now what we know and how we know only in part but in what is to come we'll be fully known.

And so we pray that we would live in light of that day. We would love what you love, desire what you desire and it would, that true reality would make us live and serve you and press on.

You know the things that we go through, you know the hardships, you know the sins, you know the things that are on our minds, the things that keep us awake at night, Lord. Help us to press on.

[31 : 51] Show us what it looks like to have that godliness in us, that godly attitude and what it's like to live like that. Help us to press on, Lord. Give us that deep love and desire to be with you where you are.

So we commit our lives into your hands. We pray this week that what we've heard would stay with us and would help us to live and work for your praise and glory. We ask for all this in the name of Christ.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.