

Pressing on to know Christ

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[0 : 0 0] What goals do you have for 2012? Continuing with the Olympic theme, there is a young 22-year-old who woke up this morning in Inverurie who could answer that question without a moment's hesitation, a gold medal in the 400-meters individual medley at the London Olympics. Hannah Miley, I'm redeeming myself by not calling her Miley Cyrus on this occasion, Hannah Miley is Scotland's great hope for the summer. For Hannah, the goal is crystal clear, and everything she does, and indeed everything she chooses not to do, revolves around this clear and unshakable goal.

What about you? What are your goals for 2012? Maybe even as you hear the question, there is a cynical side to you. I certainly am guilty of that, of thinking, well, yes, of course, 1st of January, we'll be challenged about goals and resolutions and the year ahead, and I've heard it all before, and really I'm beyond that kind of talk, too old or maybe just too cynical for such idealistic talk of goals and objectives in the year that begins. For Christians, there is only one goal goal that really matters, and a goal that we should all pursue with a passion that would leave even Olympic athletes looking on in wonder. It is the goal that Paul pursued and invites all believers to pursue.

We've read in Philippians chapter 3, and very particularly the words that Paul pens there in verse 14, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

Now, it is heart-pumping language, but what does it mean? What is the goal, and how is it to be pursued? These are the matters that will occupy us this morning. There are three questions that I want to pose and answer that all revolve around the matter of the goal that Paul speaks of. First of all, what is the goal?

Then, how is this goal to be reached? And then finally, and more briefly, what is the prize for those who do reach the goal? But we begin with a very fundamental question, what is the goal? What do you think it is?

[3 : 0 6] The language is, for many of us, very familiar. It's certainly very stirring language that maybe we just assume that we know what it is that Paul is speaking about. But do we? And so, I ask you again the question, and give you a moment to, in your own mind, answer the question. What is the goal that Paul is referring to here? I press on towards the goal. What is it? What are your own thoughts? In your own mind, answer that question, or try and answer it. Give a stab at answering the question. What is the goal?

It goes without saying. It's almost insulting to your intelligence to say that it's important to know what our goals are if we are to have any prospect of grasping them or achieving them.

Imagine if the aforementioned Hannah Miley was asked about the Summer Olympics and was told, or was asked, so what are your goals for the Summer? What event do you think you'll be participating in?

And she said, well, you know, I'm not really very sure yet. You know, I'm going to be speaking about it with my coach. Well, we'll find out soon enough. And once I decide what it is I really want to achieve at the Olympics, well, I'll let you know. Well, it's such a ridiculous scenario to even imagine. Of course, she knows what it is that she wants to achieve. She has it very clear. Her goal is crystal clear.

She can describe it. She can imagine it. She visualizes it. It is crystal clear to her what it is that she is seeking to achieve. Well, as we think of the words of Paul, and as we would join with Paul in sharing this goal, what is the goal? In Paul's declaration of intent, indeed, it's more than a declaration of intent. It is a description of his present and continuing activity. I press on.

[5 : 18] Not something he intends to do, not something that he wants to do, he aspires to do. No, something he is doing. I press on towards the goal. But in these words, there in verse 14, he doesn't specify what the goal is. What we need to do is a little detective work to identify the goal.

And this will involve backtracking through the passage to find where the goal is explicitly described. So, let's do that work together. And you'll need to concentrate to follow this voyage of discovery through the passage, backtracking from this declaration of the goal to where the goal is actually described. In verse 13a, we have the first clue. There we read, Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards it what is ahead, I press on towards the goal. So, the goal is the it that he speaks of in verse 13 at the beginning.

I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. Well, that doesn't help us a great deal, because we're still left asking the question, well, what is it? But it does help us in as much as it identifies that this goal is something that he needs to take hold of. He hasn't yet taken hold of it, but it is what he intends to take hold of. Very well.

The language of taking hold of then takes us back to verse 12, where he uses this same language of taking hold of to describe that which he has not already obtained. Let's read verse 12. Look at it with me. Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of it. So, what he wants to take hold of that which he has not already obtained. That is described as all this. It doesn't move us a great deal forward from the it of verse 13. The goal is all this. But what is all this? Well, for that, we go back one further step or backtrack in the passage itself to verses 10 and 11. And what do we read there? 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, and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this.

And so, there in verse 10, we have described for us the all this that he has not yet obtained, that he is seeking to take hold of, the goal that he is pursuing. And what is it? Well, in one simple statement, we have it at the very beginning of verse 10, without a need to go through the whole verse, though we will in a moment. At the very beginning, we have very explicitly identified for us what the goal is. I want to know.

[8 : 45] Christ. I want to know Christ. So, when Paul says there, I press on towards the goal. We say, well, what is the goal? Well, this is the goal. I want to know Christ. That is what I want. That is the one thing. Leaving everything else aside, this is what I want. I want to know Christ. Knowing Christ is the all this that Paul has not already obtained. Knowing Christ is the it that he has not yet taken hold of. Knowing Christ is the goal that he is pressing on towards.

Now, what do we make of this goal that Paul has to know Christ? Again, it may sound quite stirring, but is it not a little strange that Paul would say that his goal is to know Christ?

Here is a man who has lived the Christian life faithfully and fruitfully for many years. Here is a man who quite evidently knows Christ already. Indeed, in this very passage, he has explicitly testified to the fact that he does know Christ.

Notice there what he says in verse 8. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

What clearer testimony or declaration could there be of Paul saying, I know Christ. I know this man, Christ Jesus. He is my Lord. He is my Savior. I know him.

[10 : 28] And so in the light of that, is it not a little strange that he would declare it as the one thing he does, his overriding goal, to know Christ?

If he already does know Christ. Well, I think it becomes very clear, even in posing the question, that knowing Christ involves more than a one-off introduction.

It involves more than a knowledge concerning who Christ is, or even a saving knowledge of Christ, as Paul enjoyed. To know Christ is to experience Christ and to become like Christ.

And you don't need to take my word for it. Because Paul himself, in verses 10 and 11, that begin with this declaration, I want to know Christ.

Paul defines what knowing Christ involves. The way we can best understand how these verses, verses 10 and 11, if you wish, define, at least in a measure, what knowing Christ involves, is if we understand the word and, there in verse 10, as implying the idea of namely.

[11 : 41] So if we read verse 10 in that way, and if you follow the verse with me, I think it will be more helpful for you to get the idea. Verse 10 of chapter 3 of Philippians, So verse 10 begins by this declaration, I want to know Christ.

And then he goes on to define that, what that looks like, what that involves. We want to think about that. This is the goal. Well, what does it involve, this goal of knowing Christ?

Well, the first thing that Paul says is it involves experiencing the power of his resurrection. What does that look like? Well, let's tease out the meaning, or in any case, one aspect of the meaning.

What was the resurrection a victory over? I don't think that's a very difficult question. It was a victory over death. Death was conquered at the resurrection.

What was death the result of? Or to use the biblical language, what was death the wages of? We know the answer. It was the result of, it was the wages of sin.

[12 : 58] So when Paul speaks of knowing Christ and understanding this knowing Christ as experiencing the power of his resurrection, then surely he must mean at least this, that it is to experience the power and the victory over sin in our lives.

The resurrection was a victory over death. It was a victory over the power of sin. And so for us as believers to know Christ in this dimension, the power of his resurrection must involve certainly this.

Indeed, we could possibly identify other aspects, but I want to focus on this. Power and victory over sin in our own lives. Sin must no longer have dominion over us.

For we have at our disposal resurrection power to resist temptation, to win our daily and continuing battle with sin.

That in this year we would know Christ in the power of his resurrection. That would help us and allow us to conquer our pride and our selfishness.

[14 : 10] That we would stop lying and twisting the language that we use. Maybe very, seemingly very politely and very respectfully, but twisting it to our own advantage.

To lose that appetite that we have, that seemingly insatiable appetite for stuff that doesn't satisfy. To win that victory over sin in all its many presentations and all its many forms.

In our sexual lives, to live lives that are pleasing to God. To stop having sex with your girlfriend or your boyfriend. To stop looking at porn on the web.

To leave behind coarse and vulgar joking and speaking ill of other people and gossiping about other people. And we could go on and on and on. The goal is to know Christ.

Knowing Christ involves experiencing the power of his resurrection. And surely the power of his resurrection must involve this. Power over sin.

[15 : 17] Winning the victory over sin. We could maybe put it another way. That Paul's goal is that that inward righteousness that is a gift that comes by faith.

That he speaks of in verse 9. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law. But that which is through faith in Christ. That gift of righteousness.

That grants him status before God as a righteous man. That that inward righteousness, if we can call it that way or describe it in that way.

Would be reflected in outward righteousness. In the life that he lives. A righteous life. A life where sin is conquered.

A life where he doesn't simply surrender to the wiles of the evil one and to the power of temptation.

[16 : 18] So to know Christ involves experiencing the power of the resurrection. But Paul goes on to say more here in verse 10. It involves experiencing the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.

Now this is in some regards more difficult. And we have to be very brief. Almost irresponsibly brief in commenting on this aspect of knowing Christ.

But surely here when Paul speaks of experiencing. Of sharing in Christ's sufferings. He's speaking of those sufferings that come with faithful witness to Christ.

In a fallen and hostile world. It's something that Paul often speaks of. We think of the words that he pens in chapter 8 of Romans.

In verse 36. As it is written. For your sake. For your sake. For the sake of Christ. We face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

[17 : 16] The fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. And notice that Paul does not see these sufferings simply as an unfortunate though necessary consequence of fidelity.

But he sees these sufferings as something that he actively desires. You know we could say well yes if I'm going to be faithful to Christ. Well there will be suffering that will come with that.

And well I wish it weren't so but that's just the way it is. And I have to accept it. Maybe at one level that's a reasonable way of looking at it. But here Paul says I want to.

I want to know Christ. And the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. Why would he want to participate in? To share in the sufferings of Christ.

Described or defined in the way that we've sought to define them. We can sum it up maybe in two words. And we really have to leave it at mentioning the two words and allowing yourselves to develop the thought.

[18 : 19] First of all the word privilege. Surely there is this sense of privilege. Paul sees it as a privilege. It's not that he enjoys pain. It's not that he enjoys physical suffering. It's not that he enjoys being in prison.

Or being beaten. Or being insulted. Or marginalized. But there is a real privilege of suffering in that way for Jesus. Privilege.

But also surely the word purpose. Paul understands that there is a purpose in this suffering. That the Lord is working in him. By means of these experiences.

Difficult and painful and unpleasant though they are. To make him the man that he wants him to be. And so he is able to say, I want to. I want to know Christ. And I want to know Christ in this regard.

Sharing in the fellowship of his sufferings. But then a final thing that we can say regarding what knowing Christ involves.

[19 : 17] As defined by Paul. This is his goal. To know Christ. What does that mean? Well he tells us there in verse 10. And the third thing that he mentions there in verse 10.

Is experiencing becoming like Christ. Knowing Christ involves becoming like Christ. This is the ultimate goal that victory over sin and sharing in his sufferings are part of and contribute to.

Becoming like Jesus. Now in this verse Paul seems to make a very specific reference to a desire for martyrdom.

Then in verse 10 when he speaks, becoming like him in his death. He speaks very specifically about becoming like him in his death. It may well be that Paul has that thought in mind.

He writes this letter as a prisoner in a Roman cell. And martyrdom was a very real possibility. So it's possible that this is what he has in mind. In this same letter he speaks of wishing to depart and be with Christ.

[20 : 21] Which is better by far. But whether he is martyred or not is neither here nor there. Ultimately. But what does matter is that he become like Christ.

This is the central truth. The central thought. The matter of most importance. That he would become like Christ. If in God's providence that is so.

Even in the manner of his death as a martyr. So be it. But the important thing. Is that knowing Christ involves becoming like Christ. So to summarize.

What is the goal? What is the goal that he presses on towards? What is the goal that he speaks of there in verse 14? I press on towards the goal. Well the goal is to know Christ.

What is involved in knowing Christ? Resurrection power. To defeat sin. And live in newness of life. Fellowship in his sufferings. Becoming like Jesus.

[21 : 20] And so I ask you again this morning. What is your goal for 2012? Are you able to say that my goal is that I want to know Christ?

I want to become more like Jesus. We have to say very swiftly. How is the goal to be reached? Here we have to distinguish between what God does and what we do.

What does God do? There is very reassuring language that we find in verse 12. Paul says not that I have already obtained all this. Or have already been made perfect.

But I press on to take hold of that. For which Christ Jesus took hold of me. In this matter of becoming like Jesus.

This goal that Paul has. It all begins with God. God is the one who graciously fixes his eyes upon us to save us. It was the Son of God who, while we were yet sinners, died for us.

[22 : 27] And it is that same Jesus who in our experience takes hold of us with this purpose. That we would become like him.

Now is that not a wonderfully reassuring truth? Can you, believer, can you imagine Jesus ever loosening his grip on you?

He has taken hold of you. Can you imagine that he will ever loosen that grip? Never. He will never loosen his grip on you. He has taken hold of you.

And he will not let you go. You may doubt. You may waver. You may fail. You may deny him. You may wander in all kinds of directions.

But he has you in his grip. We are in the grip of grace. And it is a vice-like grip. He's taken hold of you.

[23 : 28] He's taken hold of you. He doesn't say, look, you must do this. I stand back. No, he's taken hold of you for this purpose. But notice that Paul, in speaking of the goal that he is pursuing, also acknowledges that it is God who ensures that the goal is achieved.

In verse 12, he is speaking of the goal as all this, as we've noted. And then he describes it in another way. Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect.

This is really just another way of speaking about knowing Christ. But notice the manner that Paul states the case. He speaks of being made perfect.

Another is involved in making Paul perfect. It is God who makes Paul perfect. God is at the heart of this task of making us who we are meant to be, that we would know Christ.

Does that mean that we sit back and simply passively wait for him to do what he has to do? No. That is something that you need to do. Just as we have been taken hold of, so we must in turn take hold of that for which Christ took hold of us.

[24 : 50] That's precisely what Paul says there in verse 12. And this is simply another way of saying what Paul says in the following verses. But one thing I do.

One thing I do. And what is this one thing that he does? Well, it seems to be more than one thing. But it's one thing that involves other things. The one thing that Paul declares he is doing and that we must do is press on.

This is the central verb in the statement. I press on towards the goal. One thing I do. Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead.

I press on. This is the central action that Paul is engaged in. He's engaged in pressing on. The verb is a very intense one.

It can be used of a man running a race. Indeed, it's the word that Paul uses in verse 6 to speak of his persecuting the church. It gives you an idea of the intensity of the word.

[25 : 52] This is what you have to do. You have to press on to the goal of knowing Christ with passion and verb and intense single-mindedness. Now, this one thing, pressing on, does involve two other things that Paul identifies.

It involves forgetting what is behind. Forgetting what is behind. Well, what are we to forget? Well, everything that would hinder our pressing on, both our failures and our successes.

You know, we can be paralyzed by past failure. If we can illustrate with another sporting theme. Those of you who are interested in golf, perhaps the most dramatic golfing story of the year was Rory McIlroy's redemption, as it were.

You know, he had this very dramatic failure at the U.S. Masters. He led by several strokes. He was playing wonderful golf. He practically had his hand on the trophy.

And then there was this dramatic course. He just fell apart on the final day and lost by a mile. And it was such a dramatic occasion. But then, just a few weeks later, there was the U.S. Open.

[27 : 03] And at the U.S. Open again, he was playing wonderfully well. And he was miles ahead of the field and everybody was thinking, will the master's curse come upon him? Will his past failure destroy him?

But no, he was able to forget that failure. To put it behind him. And to go on and win a famous victory. You know, in our own, in our Christian lives, if we are to press on to this goal, we must be very careful that we don't allow past failure to paralyze us.

Maybe in this year that has passed, you are conscious of having failed Jesus. Maybe in a very specific way. You're aware of it. Maybe nobody else knows about it, but you know about it.

And you think, I'm a failure. And you think, well, how can I be a useful, fruitful Christian when I've done this, when I've behaved in this fashion, when I've lived in this way? And Paul says to you this morning, just forget about it.

Forget about it. Confess it and forget about it. And press on. Maybe it's not a dramatic failure. Maybe it's not some gross sin. Maybe it's just a grinding mediocrity that you've kind of got used to.

[28 : 11] Maybe not only in one year, but over many years. And you think, well, that's the way I've always been. My Christian life has always been like that. And I can't really imagine that this year will be any different. And Paul says to you, forget about that mediocrity.

Forget about the fact that, well, you've always lived a Christian life that's neither hot nor cold. Forget about that. Confess it and forget about it and start again. Press on and take a hold of this goal to know a Christ.

But of course, not only our failures, but our successes. Maybe you can look back on a year where you have been faithful to your Lord. And the Lord has used you in different ways.

Well, good for you. And I don't mean that sarcastically. Good for you. But forget about it. Forget about it. It's in the past. This is a new year. Now you have to look ahead.

Don't rest on your laurels. Maybe some of you can look back on many years of Christian experience. Many years of faithful Christian service. Decades.

[29 : 15] Maybe if in God's providence, and I don't wish ill on anybody, but if your life were to come to an end and obituaries were to be written about you, they would be very glowing. And rightly so.

A faithful servant. A faithful Christian. Good. But you know, that's in the past. Now, as you look ahead, forget about that. Press on.

Press on. Paul had not yet taken hold, and we can be sure that none of us here have yet taken hold of that for which Christ took hold of us. To know him.

To experience him. To experience the power of his resurrection. The privilege of sharing in his sufferings and becoming like him. Forget what is behind.

But this pressing on also involves straining towards what is ahead. Forgetting what is behind. And straining towards what is ahead. This is really a vivid description of what pressing on looks like.

[30 : 16] Paul again takes up the athletics imagery of the athlete straining every sinew to reach the finishing line. It speaks of effort, but it also speaks of direction.

Of running straight ahead. Similar to what we were sharing with the children earlier on about not swerving. Not running aimlessly. Not being drawn away in one or other direction.

We are prone. As Christians, we are prone to swerve. To meander. To wander aimlessly. Maybe you did that in the year that has gone by.

You wandered. You swerved. Well, this year, may it be a year of straining towards what is ahead. As you press on towards the goal.

That goal which is to know Christ. And the power of his resurrection. And we finish with the prize that is made. Referenced to here by Paul.

[31 : 17] I press on toward the goal. To win the prize. For which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. Paul speaks of winning a prize. But rather intriguingly, he fails to reveal what the prize is.

Now, in the light of other occasions where Paul deals with this matter, we could speculate as to what prize he has in mind. Indeed, on other occasions when he uses the same imagery of the athlete, he speaks of a crown of righteousness.

Maybe this is what he has in mind. But I would suggest to you this. That when Paul here speaks of the prize, ultimately the prize that he has in mind is Christ himself.

It is Christ who takes hold of sinners such as we are. And as we take hold of Christ, and as we would recognize that knowing Christ is the goal, and single-mindedly pursue that goal, then the prize that we receive is Christ himself.

As Paul, as we've already commented in this very letter, it speaks of that to be with Christ, this is better by far. To be with Christ and to become like Christ.

[32 : 35] To be perfectly conformed to his likeness on the day of Christ Jesus. Now, in this life, we press on. And there is a sense in which our reach will always exceed our grasp.

But on the day of Christ Jesus, there will be a real sense of arrival, of completion, to use the language of the apostle. To arrive and be with Christ is the prize.

To be complete and so be like Christ is the prize. And there could be no greater prize. That would be a fitting moment to end, but I want to just ask you to bear with me for just a moment longer, as I close by posing a question to you.

In the light of what we have considered this morning, where are you? Where are you? Are you pressing on? We commented earlier that Paul here isn't speaking about an aspiration.

I want to press on. No, he is pressing on. So that's one possibility, that this morning you are pressing on towards the goal. That's one possibility.

[33 : 49] Another possibility is that you're not pressing on, but more disturbingly, not only are you not pressing on, but you don't have any great desire to press on.

It's not your intention to press on. Not in any meaningful way. So you're not pressing on, but neither is it your intention to press on. Now, if that's the case, that is a very dangerous and a very sad place to be.

But there's another possibility. You're not pressing on, but you are able to say, with a measure of sincerity and honesty, that is what I want to do. I want to know Christ.

And if the goal is to know Christ, and if to know Christ, I need to press on, then that's what I want to do. Well, that's good. But you have to take the step from wanting to, to actually doing it.

Paul doesn't just want to press on. He doesn't just want that. He is doing it. And so maybe for many of us, that's where we are. There in the middle.

[34 : 51] Yes, that's what we want. But are we actually doing it? What better way to reflect and to examine ourselves, even as we begin this year, to ask ourselves where we are, that we would be able to say, with Paul, but one thing I do, not one thing I want to do, 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 heavenwards, in Christ Jesus.

Let us pray.