

New Years Day Service

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Preacher: John McIntosh

[0 : 00] Would you turn with me for a short time this morning to the passage we read, Philippians chapter 3, and in particular to verses 12 to 14.

I'll read them again just to fix our minds on it. 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.

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 what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps just, since I see there's some young people in the congregation, can I just say a word to you before we start to look at this passage in a bit more detail. Now, 2008, if I remember correctly, is a year when there's going to be Olympic Games in Peking.

And for a couple of weeks, the whole world's attention will be fixed on those Olympic Games. But did you remember that when the Apostle to the Hebrews was writing to the Hebrew believers all over the world at that time, the Jewish believers in Christ, he actually said that the whole Christian life is like a race.

[1 : 33] Like a race. Not like a hundred metre sprint, but actually more like a long distance race. And he said that it's very helpful if you consider yourselves, every Christian considers themselves, to be like a long distance runner.

And the great and important thing about the Christian life is that you need to persevere, you need to endure, you need to go through all the difficult times, all the pain barriers and things like that that we know about if you're into athletics at all.

And at the end of the day, you'll come to the end of the race, and there will be the Lord Jesus, who's the judge, waiting to give you the prize. And the marvellous thing about the Christian life, you know, is that the prize just doesn't go to the person who comes first.

Marvellous thing about the Christian life is that every Christian believer gets the prize. You know? And can I just suggest to you that, because, you know, later on in the year we'll be thinking like this, everybody will be thinking about races and things like that, and running and all these sorts of things, to remember about the Christian life.

And remember how the prize goes to everybody. Every believer receives the prize of entry into heaven. Well, this passage that we're looking at today is a bit, it sort of ties into that somewhat.

[3 : 04] Because what Paul is talking about here in Philippians chapter 3, verses 12 to 14, is what we might call frustration and hope in pursuing the goal.

And I think that's really quite a good subject to be thinking about on this, the first day of 2008. Thinking about the frustrations that the Christian experience, but also thinking about the way in which we must pursue the goal of the Christian life with confidence.

And that's what this is about, so you know roughly where we're going, and I think you should be able to understand the sorts of things that I want to talk about. Well, let's look then at these verses 12 to 14 of Philippians chapter 3.

Can I just draw your attention, first of all, to one or two things, which I think are really quite important. Paul clearly implies that he's got quite a deep sense of frustration.

There's Paul, perhaps the greatest of all the apostles in terms of the work which he did, and the number of people whose preaching and whose conversation he was the means of converting, bringing to faith in the Lord Jesus.

[4 : 16] But here he is, writing to the Philippians, who he really felt very close to, particularly close to the believers in Philippi, and he's confessing to this frustration that he feels has characterized his whole life.

You know, the reality of Paul's existence as he sees it, didn't conform totally to what he was saying in verses 9 to 11, where he's talking about the way in which he considers all the other worldly things that he could have had rubbish that he might gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

And Paul basically says, my life really hasn't been everything that it should have been. I haven't really achieved all these things. And he's really admitting a degree of failure.

And that admission of failure, I think, is also suggested by what he says later on, where he says that he needs to forget what was behind him.

[5 : 33] So here's Paul admitting that he's not perfect. And that's something, I think, which at the beginning of a new year, we all should be looking at ourselves in the face, as it were, and admitting the same sorts of things as Paul was admitting here.

Now the reasons for Paul's disclaimers are difficult to work out. It's possible that there were Judaizers, people who'd come into the church in Philippi, and who were saying that to be more complete in Christ, they had to follow the law of Moses and all the various ceremonial requirements.

And if you did that, that was the ultimate status of being a Christian, but also someone who kept the law of Moses. But we're not told exactly what it was, but certainly there was something that was going on that Paul felt slightly uncomfortable about and needed to confess, as it were.

And the second thing, I think, is this, that we need to note the balance which is there, and balance is an important word in the Christian life as well, I think we all know that. The balance which there is, I think, between Paul's distrust of himself with his confidence that the work of grace, the work of salvation, the faith that he has, is grounded in Christ's work of grace.

So on the one hand, he distrusts himself, and on the other hand, he has a great confidence in the work of the Lord Jesus and the grace of the Lord Jesus. And that, I think, really explains verse 12.

[7 : 07] 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. You know, that's another of Paul's great statements about salvation.

Verse 12, one that we should come back to time and time again. He makes a strong theological point about the tension between human agency and divine sovereignty.

You know, there are some people who basically think they've got to work to gain their own salvation, and they don't think too much about the Lord Jesus. They think about what they're doing, and they set themselves all sorts of requirements.

And on the other hand, there are people who sit back and don't use the means of grace. They don't read their Bibles as they should. They don't pray as much as they should. They don't come to church to hear the preaching of the gospel as much as they should.

And people like that on both sides have got the balance wrong. You know, there is a balance to be struck in the attainment of salvation.

[8 : 12] You know, there's no one going to be able to appear at the judgment seat and say, Lord, you didn't save me.

Because we are all responsible to use the means to have confidence in God's promises. And realizing that salvation comes by faith and it's a gift from God himself.

On the other hand, we do have responsibilities. We can't sit back and wait for it to happen. So Paul really makes this important point in verse 12. And he makes the point within the framework of his own personal confession about his Christian experience.

Really, it's quite a remarkable verse. The great apostle Paul, profound theologian, revealed to him by God himself his theological insights.

And he says, not that I've 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.

[9 : 17] And one other thing before we just look at the points I want to derive from these verses. Can I just draw your attention to the structure of these verses 12 to 14? You've got two similar, more or less balanced sentences.

In verse 12, not that I've 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. Similar sort of structure in verses 13 and 14.

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what's behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal and so on. In both cases, the main verb is this word, press on.

Press on or pursue. It's a word which, you know, involves effort. There's effort involved here, you can't get away from it. And it's preceded each time he uses it by a disclaimer about not having arrived, I haven't got there yet.

And it's followed by a word about what he's pressing on towards. So, and indeed, there's another thing too, in each case, it's qualified by what one of the commentators called a divine passive.

[10 : 37] He presses on towards something Christ has already taken hold of him for. So there's a purpose that's involved at the same time.

So, let's look then at what we can derive from this. Can I say the first lesson that we need to note, I think, is that Paul tells us that he is energetically committed to his objectives of knowing Christ and the power of the resurrection, the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings and all these things.

He's energetically committed. I press on, I pursue, I struggle perhaps, if you want. It's very closely connected to the way in which, remember, Paul talks about himself as a persecutor of the church.

It's the same word. You know, Paul really persecuted the church. He persecuted the church in Jerusalem all through the land of Judah. He was heading for Damascus when the risen Lord Jesus met him on the Damascus road.

So, there's real effort. It's a continuing thing and that's what Paul is saying. And, to correct any possible misunderstanding, Paul makes it plain that he's not yet reached perfection whatever others might have said about it.

[11 : 52] But, he is determined to lay hold on it. So, he's zealously pursuing his godly objectives. In this case, the ultimate objective of being perfectly found in Christ.

Now, that's a far, far distant view of sanctification in the life of the believer from what some people think when they think that, you know, once they're converted that's it.

And, you hear things about letting go and letting God and things like that. That's not what Paul's talking about. Paul is saying that the Christian believer is a person who's energetically committed.

He's energetically committed. So, he's saying to us that the believer must appropriate the sanctifying grace of God by actively obeying him.

And, that's the thing, the first thing I draw your attention to and underline on this first day of the new year. We need to recommit ourselves and recommit ourselves energetically and we need to think, have we been the sort of energetic, committed believer that we should have been in the past year and resolve to be like that more and more in the coming year.

[13 : 05] If I can say a word to the young people again, you know, think about the athlete. Now, the athlete needs an awful lot of energetic commitment. You know, you need to train before your race if you're going to do well in it.

You need to build up your reserves of energy and your powers of endurance and things like that. So, is it you don't go, you know, you're on the long distance run and it's halfway through it and you're running out of steam and you're getting further and further behind it.

More and more dispirited and things like, it's not like that. Christian life's not like that. You've got to be committed and you've got to be energetically committed and you've got to keep on and that's what Paul, I think, is highlighting for us there.

Second thing that we need to note, I think, is that the Christian's motivation and judgment is based on what Christ has done. Now, in verse 12, Paul goes back to the Damascus Road.

The young people, you remember about Paul on the Damascus Road. He's heading for Damascus to do some more persecuting of the Christians in Damascus. and he's confronted by this bright, bright light.

[14 : 13] So bright that he basically had to fall and the others, presumably with him, fell on their faces. And then there was the voice, remember, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Who are you, Lord, he says. I'm the Lord Jesus whom you're persecuting. Paul's life is transformed. He says, what do you want me to do?

He goes to Damascus and he's blind, of course, blinded by the light. After three days, the believer comes and prays with him and he recovers his sight.

So Paul goes back to that. But that's not the key thing. It's what he actually says in the last part of verse 12. But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

because I was indeed grasped by the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus had powerfully arrested Paul, brought him up short, turned him round in his tracks.

[15 : 22] His life was set off in a new direction. And Paul says that that's the motivation for his intense desire to lay hold of Christ.

Because Christ had laid hold on him. Now that's what's happened to every believer. Jesus has laid hold on us.

And that's actually what you see when someone's converted. It's Christ laying hold on them.

And the big question which arises is why? Why? Paul's in effect drawing our attention to the question of what did Jesus have in mind when he laid hold on Paul?

Well, in one sense, the Lord has as many purposes as he has individual believers. Because for each of us, God's already decided on the works by which we are going to serve him.

[16 : 39] Therefore, we must think carefully, pray carefully, in order that it will be revealed to us what's to be the nature of our wholehearted service.

What's our particular part in the purpose of God? And it's no bad thing at the beginning of a new year for us all to think about that. Why did Christ save me?

For his glory, of course, but also because he wants us to do something particular, something unique for us, unique to us.

So, there's as many purposes which Christ has with regard to his people as there are believers. But at the same time, for every converted person, there is actually an identical goal as well.

And that's to be satisfied with Jesus. And to grow more and more like him. Every one of us have that common purpose, common objective.

[17 : 55] So, how much more satisfied have we grown with the Lord Jesus as our saviour in 2007?

Have we made progress spiritually? we want more in 2008. Are we getting more like him?

Not as much as we should be, we're like Paul. But surely, in this next new year which has become, we all want to be more like him. That's a clear objective.

And then, in verse 14, he comes back to that. I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

The divine calling to salvation, especially that initial summons which Paul had on the Damascus road, which we had in different places and different times and so on. The Lord issues the call.

[19 : 02] And it's the sphere of Christ Jesus himself that the summons is given. It's calling heavenwards in Christ Jesus. Now, what does Paul mean here? Well, I think there's four things which are included.

God has called Paul to himself and that call will culminate in glory. God has called every one of us who are his people heavenwards.

He's called us heavenwards, called us to himself. And that will culminate in glory. We, his people, are on the way to glory.

That's where God has called us. That call, the second thing which began at his conversion in Paul's case, or in cases too, is heavenwards in terms of its final goal.

We must never lose sight of the fact that we're on the way to heaven. Our goal is not just to get to the end of another year. Our goal is not just to get to retirement. Our goal is not to, it's nothing to do with anything that's at all of this world.

[20 : 08] The goal of the Christian believer is heaven, let's never forget it. And God's call is found in its historical and its historical focus and its focus in experience in Christ Jesus.

Let's never get away from that. Our call is in Christ Jesus. We are involved with him, we're part of his body. We must never lose sight of that. And Paul is meaning at the end of the race he will gain the prize.

The tangible evidence that the goal of God's call has been reached. And that's what's the case for every one of us who believes and trusts the Lord Jesus.

At the end of our earthly race will gain the prize. The absolutely irrefutable tangible evidence that the goal of God's call for us has been reached.

So then the Christian life is a balance. It's a balance between past and future. Paul and verse 13 is the thing, is the verse here.

[21 : 31] And in the last part of verse 13, 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 and so on.

Paul actually says it very dramatically. He says, literally, he just says, one thing, but one thing. Forgetting what's behind and straining towards what's ahead. Now Paul is not forgetting past mercies.

He's not forgetting what he was talking about there in verse 7, that whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. He's not forgetting that. He's not forgetting the valuable lessons from the past which he talks about in verse 2 to verse 6.

But he's talking about a sort of dwelling on the past which hinders present efforts. And hinders future progress.

Because sometimes that does happen in the life of the believer. All sorts of things can hinder our efforts and prevent us making progress.

[22 : 38] Sometimes, for example, it's bereavement. Bereavement's always hard for everyone, we know that. But sometimes it happens with Christians that the sadness and the difficulties caused by the loss of a loved one seem to make things grind to a halt in terms of our spiritual efforts.

It can be something like bitterness. You know, one of the worst possible things that can happen in a Christian congregation or to a Christian believer is to become embittered about something.

A root of bitterness can actually, it can just absolutely prevent blessing and prevent spiritual progress. forgiveness. It's so, so important that if one of the Lord's people has wronged you in some way, or whether you think a person has wronged you in some way, that you go and sort it out.

And if you're aware that you've wronged someone, it's crucially important to actually go and confess and make amends. These sorts of things can actually, when they happen in the life of a congregation, they can actually destroy the possibility of the congregation actually making spiritual progress and contributing more to the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ, the cause of the gospel.

And sometimes, you know, it's just being too focused on the past history of your congregation or the past, your individual past history.

[24 : 11] and it might be that you feel that the past was so much better than the present, or it might, in the other direction, be feeling that the past was so bad that you can't make progress from it.

You know, there's a very interesting passage in Zechariah, which speaks, I think, just about this very problem. Zechariah, chapter 2.

Remember in chapter 1, you've been getting prophecies of judgment, to claim this is what the, this is what the Lord Almighty says, I was very jealous, jealous with Jerusalem and Zion, but I'm very angry with the nations and so on.

Then he says this prophecy of the four horns and these are the horns, this is chapter 1 of Zechariah, verse 18, these are the horns that scattered Judah and Jerusalem and so on.

And then there's this prophecy at the beginning of chapter 2 of the man with the measuring line. Then I looked up and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand.

[25 : 24] I asked, where are you going? He answered me to measure Jerusalem to find out how wide and how long it is. Then the angel who was speaking to me left and another angel came to meet him and said to him, run, tell that young man, Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it.

And I myself will be a wall of fire around it, declares the Lord, and I will be its glory within. Now I think what's happening there is that the prophet is thinking very much in terms of the glories of Jerusalem in the past and the temple before it was destroyed and all these sorts of things and it seems that he's thinking that the heavenly new Jerusalem is going to be like that.

It's going to be something that you can measure. He's judging the future in terms of the past. And in actual fact, Jerusalem is going to be a city without walls because there's going to be so many people in it.

And in any case, the Lord is going to be the wall of fire around it and not just a wall of fire around it. He's going to be the glory within it. So I think there's something there which we need to think about and as we look ahead to a new year in the life of your congregation, in the life of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in general, we mustn't think in terms of the past in such a way that it prevents us having vision for the future.

Sometimes the Lord's people allow bygone glories and allow past failures to decide the dimensions of the future and we mustn't. The progressing Christian cultivates a concentrated forward look to where the goal is.

[27 : 16] That's what we're all to do. Paul aims to win his prize not by coming first of course but by finishing because the same reward is given to all who finished.

the greatest reward says Paul is to know Christ fully and to be in perfect fellowship with the Lord Jesus who met him and who laid hold of him, apprehended him if you like, on the Damascus road.

good. And that's the same for us. We mustn't be looking over our shoulders at others. We mustn't be looking back at where we've set out from but we should be looking ahead at the goal, at the prize ahead.

And we need to keep on running a straight course, not wandering off to the right or to the left. And Paul says that the goal awaits.

He's waiting for the resurrection. He's waiting for the Lord's well done. He's waiting for the crown of righteousness awarded by the Lord, the righteous judge.

[28 : 38] He's waiting for the unfading crown of glory, as Peter put it. And remember what Paul himself said in 1 Corinthians chapter 2.

He hasn't heard, or I seen, or even entered into the heart of man, into the imagination of any of us, what the Lord has waiting for us.

So the Christian motivation is to get this balance between past and future right. heart. And our motivation is based on what Christ has done.

And we must be energetically committed to it. That's the challenge for 2008. May we all rise to it by grace.

May we all see something, at least a glimpse, of what awaits us. Let us pray. Lord, our gracious God, we come before you and we would seek to examine ourselves in the light of your word.

[29 : 48] We would pray that the things that your servant Paul reveals for us here in this passage might be of use to us at this time and in this year which has begun. We pray, Lord, that you would enable us all to be keeping our eyes on the heavenly prize.

us. We pray that you would keep us also bearing in mind what the purpose might be for which the Lord Jesus took hold of us when he brought us from his death to life.

We pray, Lord, that we might be very earnest in seeking to discern what that might be, knowing that we will not necessarily see the whole purpose, but we should bear in mind that there is a purpose and we should seek to be fulfilling it as far as we can.

We pray, Lord, that this year which has begun, which would be a year of blessing for your people here, both individually and in their families and as a congregation of your people.

We'd seek, Lord, that you would reveal to them what you would have them to do and that you would reassure them of your presence with them as the days go by. We'd seek, Lord, that always we might be keeping our mind on that heavenly prize, the heaven that awaits all your people and the blessings that will be fulfilled there.

[31 : 09] We know, Lord, that in this life we cannot but see only in part, but we do look forward to the time when we will see perfectly all things being progressively revealed, seeing the Lord Jesus, seeing that we are like him and being there worshipping in the very presence of God before the great white throne that is on high.

Be with us then, O Lord, we pray. Give us the grace which we all need. Keep us all persevering and serving you faithfully and looking towards the blessings that await.

These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Let us conclude then and sing to God's praise in Psalm 102 again, the second version on page 368 and from verse 23 on.

My strength he weakened in the way, my days of life he shortened. My God, who take me not away in mid-time of my days, I said, thy years throughout all ages last.

Of all thou hast established the first foundation firm and fast. Thy mighty hands the heavens have made. They perish shall as garments do, but thou shalt evermore endure. As vestures thou shalt change them so and they shall all be changed sure.

[32 : 29] From all changes thou art free, thy endless years do last for aid. Thy servants and their seed who be established shall before thee stay.

Those verses, Psalm 102, the second version from verse 23 to the end, my strength he weakened. in the way. In the way. In the way. world they shall beat.

And if I love my days I serve.

My nations Tina allbt the 524 finally He so wished the earth's foundation firm and fast.

Thy mighty hand let them come near.

[34 : 11] They perish shall as garments blue. Thou shalt evermore endure.

As besters thou shalt change them so. And they shall all be changed sure.

Humble changes have a tree. Thy endless years to last foray.

Thy servants are blessed to be. Thy established thou in the Holy Spirit.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and always.

[35 : 45] Amen. Amen. Amen.