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Experiencing Joy: A Study in Philippians

Press On Toward the Goal

Philippians 3:12-16

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She was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and because of a number of childhood diseases she was unable to walk and had braces on her legs. The doctors told her parents she would probably never walk or run and play like the other kids. But as she began to grow up, she asked her mom that question, “Will I ever run and play like other kids?” Her mom told her, “If you believe, I think you will.” So her daughter believed that and began to learn to walk without the braces, unknown to her parents or her doctor. Her brothers and sisters helped her, and on her 12th birthday she shocked both her parents and the doctors when she took off the braces...and walked! And she never put them on again.

She went out for the high school basketball team. She was still learning how to use these legs, and the coach really paid her little attention. But she said to her coach, “If you will spend ten extra minutes with me every practice, I will give you back a champion.” Well, the coach thought this was kind of humorous, but he went along with it. Her senior year they *were* the state champions, and she *was* the champion player.

It was during that state championship that one of the referees happened to be a track coach. He noticed her athletic ability and asked her if she had ever run track. She said “no” so he got her lined up with the track team. In 1956 she represented the United States in the Olympics in Australia where she was part of a relay team that won a bronze medal. But that wasn't good enough. So for four years she worked, and in 1960 when the Olympics were in Rome, she won the 100-meter gold medal, 200-meter gold medal, and was part of the 400-meter relay team that won the gold medal. All three of those were world record times. Her name was Wilma Rudolph.

We hear these stories of people who go beyond the limitations and against the odds and just have the grit and determination to believe. And they can do some amazing things! Just imagine what might happen to our lives if we had that kind of grit and determination to believe what God says is true. Now in the case of Wilma Rudolph, what she was believing may or may not have come to pass. But in our case, we're being asked to believe that God tells the truth...and to believe that in such a way that it dramatically affects our life.

The problem is, we understand this theological truth of what we are in Christ. But then there seems to be this big gap between that and how we live out our lives on a practical basis. It's that gap that discourages us and causes us to wonder if this is real, if this is really working. And we often feel more like failures than successes as Christians.

Paul understands that. Philippians 3:1-11 is a very encouraging passage in which he talks about what he does with that gap. He says it causes him to press on in a way that is life changing.

Paul has just finished a discussion on what we would call positional truth. Positional truth basically has to do with that theological truth that is true of us simply because we are *in* Christ. It's not based on our performance; it's not based on what we did yesterday or tomorrow. It's simply true because it is based on Christ.

Paul has been talking about the fact that, because we have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior, we can stand before a holy God in perfect righteousness. I do not stand righteous because of how I performed this last week. I stand righteous because, when I trusted Jesus by faith, the very righteousness of God was credited to my account; so when God looks at me, what He actually sees is the righteousness of Christ. He sees His own righteousness! Therefore I am perfectly acceptable. There is no need for performance anxiety; I can be at rest. I can be at ease in the presence of God because He sees His own righteousness. That is what we call positional truth. That is *true*.

But often we feel this gap between that truth and how we live on a daily basis. Paul understands that. He doesn't want us, as the readers, to think he is saying he has arrived—that he has reached some level of perfection. He is not trying to set a standard so high that every day we're discouraged and we just finally give up and quit.

Verse 12: “Not that I have already obtained it.” The word “it” there is not in the Greek, and I think it is clearer without it. He says, “Not that I have already obtained.” We would say the same thing in English: “Not that I have arrived.” Paul is saying, “I haven't arrived. I haven't become perfect, even though I am in perfect righteousness before God.” Again, there is a reminder that he is in process; he is on a journey. Remember, we read in Philippians 1:6 that God promised, “I started this work and I'm going to complete it.” That language itself implies that we're “in process”—it isn't over yet. That's what Paul is saying.

There's a reminder in all of this that it's very important we understand that we're in process; we're on a journey. As my girls were growing up, it would have been unrealistic to look at one that was 5 years old and expect her to act like a 40 year old. Now we understand that's unrealistic. She's not 40; she's 5. We know that our children are in process, and we patiently work through the process as they become mature.

The same thing is true spiritually. You cannot become spiritually mature overnight. You can't become spiritually mature in six months. You just can't. We have to understand that we're on a journey, and there has to be grace and patience as people process through this journey. But sometimes we get this glimpse of the ideal—that we are to become like Christ—and we set the standard so high that it's unrealistic. We then become discouraged or we start to think it just isn't working, and sometimes we quit.

We need to understand, as we travel this journey, what's more important than perfection is perseverance: that I press on, that I just continue down the path. That's what Paul is talking about. He says, “Not that I have already obtained [*or arrived*], or have already become perfect.” The word “perfect” used here is a noun which means to be a champion, to be the victor, to have completed the race. There's a lot of athletic imagery in this particular text, and I think that's what he's talking about here. He is saying that he hasn't finished the race to where he's been crowned the champion...yet.. “Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect.”

So what does Paul do? He says, “...but I press on.” That word “press on” is another athletic term. It's the idea that I push, I stretch, I take myself to the limit like an athlete would do in order to accomplish the goal. Paul says, “I press on.”

When we think about this process or this journey and pressing on, it's like going to an athletic event. For example, when you go to a football game or a basketball game, you don't go to that event as a fan and just sit there and wait until the whole thing is over to see who

wins and who loses. Rather, what you do is encourage anything that appears to be progress toward the goal. So in a football game, if there's some movement down the field, the fans cheer. What they are doing is cheering *progress*. Their cheering is a way of saying, *You're getting closer to the goal!* That's how it works.

That's the same thing that needs to be true in our Christian lives. We need to learn to celebrate progress. We need to press on; we need to persevere. In other words, I haven't arrived yet, but I want to be more like Jesus today than I was yesterday. And I want to be more like Jesus today than I was a year ago. I'm going to have some great days, and I'm going to celebrate those. And I'm going to have some lousy days; and on those days I'm going to get up and brush myself off and say, "I'm not going to settle for that; I'm going to press on...and I'm going to press on...and I'm going to press on."

The reason Paul does that is described in the last half of verse 12: "I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." It's a play on words, and what Paul is talking about is a doctrine that we often refer to as the doctrine of election, or God's choosing. It's this idea that is taught both in the Old Testament and the New Testament: that before I ever chose God, He chose me. At one time I was simply a lost sinner destined for eternal punishment, when God reached down—not because I had done anything, but simply because of His own grace and mercy—and He grabbed hold of me. That's what Paul means when he says, "He laid hold of me."

Why? Ephesians 1:6 tells us, "to the praise of the glory of His grace," which means God reached down and grabbed hold of me that I might become a trophy of His grace. Ephesians 2:10 says that God reached down and grabbed hold of me in order that He might display me in the heavenlies as a trophy of His grace, that what I become is so magnificent the angels in heaven will gasp when they see me. And it's all on the basis of His grace.

That's why it's offensive to God that we try to add *any* of our own works to that salvation: because God doesn't want to hold us up in the heavenlies and have us say, "Yeah, look at what God and I did together." But rather, it is purely "to the praise of the glory of His grace"—this is what God did purely on the basis of His grace. That's what Paul means when he says, "I was laid hold of." So what he's saying is, "I, then, need to grab hold of the purpose for which I was grabbed hold of."

So I have to say, "I believe that! I believe that when I was a lost sinner, God reached down and grabbed hold me, and He is making me into a trophy of His grace. In the athletic metaphor, He is turning me into a champion. And I believe that because He said so. Therefore I grab hold of that, and I believe it and I embrace it. For that reason, I press on—because I am becoming a champion."

Let's imagine that I enter a Marathon race; and this is a Marathon race that's kind of like a cross-country race, because it goes through all these difficult obstacles and difficult terrain. Just before the race starts, God comes along and says, "I just want you to know, you will win this race." I believe that; and so the gun sounds and we take off. It's just a little ways into the race when I start to get a pain in my side. I'm starting to think, *I'm not going to make it*. But then I think, *No, wait a minute. He said I'm going to win...so give me what I need to press on*.

I go a while farther, and I fall down and injure my leg. And I think, *I'm just going to quit; I'm not going to make it*. But then I think, *Wait a minute. He promised I'm going to win. I'm going to believe that. I'm going to press on!*

I get partway through the race and when I look out, the leaders are so far out there I can hardly even see them. I'm so tired that I'm thinking, *There is just no way*. But I choose to believe it; and so I press on. I press on with that mindset of believing what He said is true. And lo and behold, by the end of the race, sure enough—I emerge as the champion.

That's exactly what Paul is saying in the last part of verse 12: that if I could just understand and embrace the purpose for which I was laid hold of, I believe that and that is why I press on. There is within this verse the balance that there's that which *I* do, and there's that which *God* does. I do understand that God is doing in and through me what I cannot do for myself. I'm totally dependent upon Him. He started this work and He is going to complete it (Philippians 1:6).

But that doesn't mean that translates into “let go and let God”—like I'm some sort of a passenger on this journey. That's not good theology. Paul says, “Work out your salvation.” He says, “I have to embrace that and I have to press on.” So I have my part in understanding that I believe He's doing His part. I embrace that; and I partner with Him and do my part in this race.

Verses 13-14: “Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet [*again, he's just saying, “I haven't arrived”*]; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” He said, “This one thing I do: I forget what lies behind and I reach forward for what lies ahead.” That's another athletic imagery: it's the picture of an athlete stretching at the tape, leaning forward to win the race. And I guarantee you, you cannot do that if you're looking backwards. He says, “I keep stretching forward to win the race.”

What does he mean by, “I forget what lies behind”? What he does *not* mean is that he somehow pushes a delete button and completely clears his memory. That's unrealistic. As a matter of fact, Paul clearly did not do that, because in the previous passage he took us back through his past. He knows that; he remembers that. What it *does* mean is that I do not dwell on my past in such a way that it negatively influences my present race. I don't dwell on the past; I don't wallow in the past. But I press on.

The fact of the matter is, I can't change the past. I can't go back and relive it. And there is nothing gained by wallowing in that. Nor is there anything gained by allowing the past to somehow limit how I run my race today. Now there are times when there is benefit to go back and understand the past because of how it affects the present. But that's very different from using my past as an excuse and wallowing in it and just thinking about it all the time. Paul says, “I've got to let it go; I've got to press on.”

Maybe in your past you have great success. Or maybe in your past you have a nightmare of a story. Either way, it's true to say that what lies ahead is far more glorious than what is in the past. So let it go. Let it go!

I think one of the things that characterizes a great athlete is a short memory. A great athlete goes out and pushes himself or herself right to the edge. And sometimes they fail. An Olympic skater may push herself to the limit and she falls. She cannot keep dwelling on that, but she's got to forget it and focus on the next routine—where she's got to press on. A great basketball player may have a key shot at a key moment and may shoot up an air ball. But he's got to forget it, because the next time he's got to believe, *I'm going to make this*. Great athletes have short memories!

Well, the same thing has got to be true of us: that we just continue to press on. I'm often reminded of Abraham Lincoln when I think of this idea of pressing on beyond failure. Abraham Lincoln failed in business in 1831...he was defeated for the Legislature in 1832...second failure in business in 1833...suffered a nervous breakdown in 1836...defeated for Speaker in 1838...defeated for Elector in 1840...defeated for Congress in 1843...defeated for Congress in 1848...defeated for Senate in 1855...defeated for Vice President in 1856...defeated for Senate in 1858. He was just a big loser, until he was elected President of the United States in 1860. And today he would be recorded as one of the best presidents in the history of our nation. Press on. Persevere. You've got to just keep going!

That's what Paul says: "I forget about what lies behind, and I focus on what lies ahead." Why does he do that? In order that he may accomplish "the goal for the prize." That word "prize" is a Greek word that means "umpire." I think he's referring to the judge in the Greek games (like their Olympic games).

"For the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." That "upward call" was a phrase used to describe that moment when the champion would be called up in front of the judge's stand. The judge was always someone highly significant, like the emperor, and it was a great thing to be called up to the stand before the judge and crowned the champion. And clearly Jesus Christ is identified as that umpire, that judge.

So Paul is painting beautiful imagery here when he says, "What causes me to forget the past, to focus on the future, to press on to run this race, is because I know when it's done the prize is that I will be called to stand before Jesus Christ as the judge and He will crown me as His champion." In the language of Ephesians, "He will hold me up in the heavenlies as a trophy of His grace, a magnificent trophy of what He has done." And Paul says, "I believe that—because God has promised." That's not what *might* be; that's not what *could* be; that is what *will* be—because it is on the basis of His power and His grace.

Therefore Paul says, "I believe that." And that is why he says, "This one thing I do." That scene is so magnificent that he says that's ultimately all that really matters. That has become his obsession in life. He says, "It is this *one* thing (it's not these 20 things) I do; it's this one thing."

So whether he's talking about his day out in the marketplace, whether he's talking about at home, whether he's talking about any place, he is completely focused and he's obsessed with this idea: I am becoming a champion, and one day I will be invited before the Judge and I will be crowned as the champion that God has made me. I believe that. Therefore, every day I live like I believe it. I'm going to have great days, and I'm going to celebrate those. God is making me into a champion. But I'm also going to have some lousy days where I fail completely. And on those days I'm going to get up and I'm going to say, "I'm not going to settle for this. I'm not going to live this way. God is making me into a champion. I can do better. And I'm going to press on...and I'm going to press on...and I'm going to press on."

Imagine if I was entering that Marathon race, and when the gun went off I was distracted with 20 other things. I get a little ways into the race and I think, *I'm kind of hungry...I think I'll stop and have some breakfast.* Maybe I even jog through the drive-thru at MacDonald's. I get a little farther and I think, *You know, maybe I'll go through this museum...that looks kind of interesting.* And I go a little farther and maybe I stop at one of the little coffee places and just have a cup of coffee. I go a little farther and there's a mall, and for whatever reason, I stop at the mall. I mean, we think about that and we realize that is silly. No runner would do

that because they get in the “zone”—they can only think about long-distance running. When they get in the zone, that's where they're at: they're focused and they run.

That's exactly what Paul is saying: “I don't get distracted with all these other things. This is my obsession.” Now I imagine my kids are going to smile on this, because I get in the zone. This is one of the things that would characterize me: I get projects going and I get in the zone—and I'm somewhat hard to live with when I'm in the zone. I'm focused until I get it done, and then I kind of go back to life. Well, Paul is saying that this is his obsession. This has become his zone, and that's what he thinks about every day: I am in the process of becoming a champion, a champion that will be so magnificent that God will put me on display. I believe that; I embrace that. So no matter what happens, I just keep pressing on...I just keep pressing on...I just keep pressing on.

Verse 15: “Let us therefore [*okay, if that's true...*], as many as are perfect, have this attitude.” You say, “Wait a minute, he said he wasn't perfect in verse 12; now he's saying we are perfect in verse 15.” Well, that's a fine observation. There are two different forms of the word “perfect.” In verse 12 it's a noun that means “to be a champion.” But in verse 15 it's an adjective that means “to be equipped, to be prepared.” In athletic terms, it means to be in shape, ready to compete. Paul is saying, “Those of us who are equipped and ready to compete... those of us who hear this and understand it... let's believe it. Let's have this attitude.”

In other words, to hear this, to understand it—and not to live like it—is unacceptable. That applies to almost every one of us. Most of us have enough information that it is clear God has said this. The only thing left is to say, “Okay, then I believe it. And because I believe it, I'm going to have this attitude.” It means I have this obsession; this is the one thing that really matters to me. When I stand before God, what's going to matter is not my money. What's going to matter is not my material things. What's going to matter is not any success I had on earth. What is going to matter is *that*; and I know that, so that's my obsession—that's what I live for. And he says, “Those of us who know it, then let's live like it.”

“...and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you.” In other words, anywhere where we're distracted and we're not living this out, God is going to get our attention. And God is going to filter that out in order that we understand this. Mike shared in his testimony a couple of weeks ago that sometimes God whispers in your ear and sometimes He hits you over the head with a rock. And he's right. A lot of it just depends on our responsiveness. If you listen to the whisper, He'll whisper. If it takes a rock, He'll use a rock. It's not because He's mad at you. It's not because He doesn't like you. It's because He wants you to know and believe you're a champion. He wants you to understand that, to believe it, and to live it. And He'll do whatever He has to do to filter stuff out until you get there.

And then finally in verse 16 he says, “However, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.” Often that word “standard” is used to mean the standard of doctrine. In other words, to the degree that we *know* truth, then let's live up to it. Some of you know a lot. Some of you know much less. But basically, for all of us, we really don't need a lot more information. What we need is to believe what we know—to believe it to the point that we live it. And that's what he's saying: “To the degree you know it, then believe it. Believe it and live it.”

It would be so interesting to have a videotape of that Marathon race, knowing that at the end I did come through as the champion—I won. I would go back and watch that whole race and see all the different difficulties and trials and how I ran that race, but I would process all of that through the filter of understanding, *You know, that was hard...and this was difficult...and that was unfair; but in the end I did emerge as the champion.* Looking at it that way would affect how I go back and view everything that happened.

Well, in essence, that is what we have. God has promised this is what He'll do. God has promised that He's going to make us into a champion, a trophy of His grace. But it's up to each of us to believe it, to embrace it, to partner with it and say, “Yes, I believe that. I believe it so much that this is my obsession. This is the one thing that I do: I press on...and I press on...and I press on.”

What I'd love to do is find the Christian in this audience who is the most discouraged right now. If you were that person, I'd love to be able to shoot a picture on the big screen showing the moment when you stand before Jesus Christ the judge, as He invites you up to that judge's stand—that “upward call”—and He has a big smile on His face as He crowns you a champion. Then He puts you on display in the heavenlies, and you are so magnificent that the angels gasp at what you've become. I wish you could just see that and know that is where this journey will end, to know that is what God is making you into. To see that would help you to process this journey.

On those good days, I celebrate. I celebrate what God is doing. And on those lousy days I get up and I say, “I won't settle for that; I am better than that. I am becoming a champion by the power and grace of God. So I'll press on...and I'll press on...and I *will* press on. I press on toward the goal for the prize: that upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Our Father, we are so thankful for what You are doing in and through us. Lord, through no merit of our own, You reached down when we were rebellious and lost, and You grabbed hold of us for the purpose of making us into a champion. It was purely on the basis of Your grace; and one day You will hold us up in the heavenlies as a trophy of Your grace.

Lord, this isn't something that might be; this isn't something that could be; this is something that will be. Lord, that is the purpose for which You have grabbed hold of us. So let us grab hold of that—to believe it and to live it. Lord, we're not perfect, but we must press on—forgetting what lies behind, focused on what lies ahead—that we would live our lives as the champions You say we are becoming. Help us to understand and believe this to the point that we live this truth.

In Jesus' name, Amen.