**Press on Toward the Goal**

February 2, 2014

Philippians 3:12-21
Key Verse 3:13b-14 “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

In July 1952, Florence Chadwick was the first woman to attempt to swim the 26 miles between Catalina Island and the California coastline. As she began this historical journey, she was followed by small boats that watched for sharks and were prepared to help her if she got hurt or grew tired. Hour after hour Florence swam, but after about 15 hours, a thick, heavy fog set in. Florence began to doubt her ability, and she told her mother, who was in one of the boats, that she didn’t think she could make it. She swam for one more hour before asking to be pulled out. As she sat in the boat, Florence found out she had stopped swimming just one mile away from the California shoreline, her destination. Florence explained that she quit because she could no longer see the coastline-there was too much fog. She couldn’t see her goal.

Two months later, Florence got back in the water to try her task once more. This time was different. She swam from Catalina Island to the shore of California in a straight path for 26 miles. The same thick fog set in, but Florence made it because she said that while she swam, she kept a mental image of the shoreline in her mind. She didn’t lose sight of the shore because she focused on that image of the coast in her mind, and in this way, she reached her goal.

As you walk this Christian walk, it’s going to get foggy. You are going to wonder how you will make it. But God tells us that if we pursue him, Jesus Christ will give us a glimpse of heaven that will help us keep our eyes focused on the goal. We can persevere in his strength, so that we might “know him, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.”

Paul’s priority is to know him. With that priority comes power--a resurrected life. With that power comes pain--sharing in Christ’s sufferings. So how does Paul deal with the pain? By gaining a new perspective--the perspective of knowing Christ.

Look at verses 13-14. “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Paul acknowledges that he can’t change the past, and he says that he doesn’t have it all figured out, but he will persevere toward that for which he has been called.

Here we learn Paul’s attitude. He said, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.” What is it that we should forget? We should not forget what God has done for us, especially his saving grace. We have to remember God’s saving grace again and again. However, we should forget what we have done, whether good or bad. When we cling to good things we have done we become proud and useless. When we cling to the bad things we have done, or to our failures, we despair and become useless. When we cling to our past deeds, we become useless. Our lives should not be bound to the past, but future-oriented. The problem is how we can forget our sins and wounds? Buddha said, “Just forget about everything.” But this does not work. When we try to forget our sins and wounds, they stick in our minds all the more. It is only possible by the blood of Jesus and the cross of Jesus. Hebrews 9:14 tells us that “the blood of Christ...[will]...cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” 1 Peter 2:24 says, “...by his wounds you have been healed.” We also need to forget our part in past victories. We can do so by recognizing God’s role instead of our own, and giving glory to God.

When we think about who Paul was and what he had done, it helps us put this teaching into perspective. Paul was a mature missionary who had pioneered many churches, raised numerous disciples and written weighty letters which became the New Testament. His influence extended around the world and into the future generations. But he never said, “It is time to retire.” He said, “Forget what is behind.” At the same time, Paul was a man who had committed the terrible sin of consenting to killing Stephen, a servant of Christ. Paul had experienced many misunderstandings and conflicts with coworkers, even leading to painful division. But he was not overcome by regret or despair over his past mistakes. He did not stop doing gospel work with a sense of defeat, and he gives no impression of being an old man. Rather, he is young in spirit and eager to grow; he presses forward without looking back. We are forgiven sinners. Jesus’ cross breaks the power of sin, heals our wounds and sets us free. It is important to forget any sentimental attachments to past sinful life. When the people of Israel faced difficulties, they missed pots of meat in Egypt in slavery, forgetting God’s grace, and complained to God. Eventually they died in the desert. God wants us to go forward. Jesus said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Lk 9:62). Let’s forget what is behind, strain toward what is ahead, and press on toward the goal.

Paul set the right life goal and pursued it with a right attitude. In doing so, he became an example for us all in following Jesus. In verse 15, Paul said, “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.” Paul believed that every mature Christian should have the same view of things that he had: set the right life goal to know Christ, and pursue that goal with a right attitude. But not everyone agreed with Paul. Some had a different idea. Paul did not argue with them. He simply said, “God will make it clear to you.” He knew that God himself would correct them, discipline them, and help them until they accepted the gospel way of life fully. The Lord is the Shepherd for each one of his people; he leads us into paths of righteousness. Instead of arguing, Paul encouraged them to keep following Jesus according to the understanding they had received from the Lord (16).

Look at verse 17. “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” There is an interesting story. One day a mother crab told her son crab, “Son, why are you always walking sideways, not straight?” The son crab answered, “Mom, please show me how to walk straight.”It is easy to talk and teach. But to set a godly example requires a painful struggle of obedience. We Christian leaders, including me, should set a good example. Jesus always set a good example for his disciples to follow. Paul also set a good example by following Christ. So he said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” Here we learn the importance of being and following good mentors. Many people ignore spiritual mentoring. They try to do something in their own way. They regard advice or counsel as interference with their human rights. As a result, they are disconnected from mature leaders and do not grow much. They are easily led astray. As Bible teachers, we must set a good example for our Bible students. As Bible students, we must learn to follow the good example of our Bible teachers. This is an essential ingredient to growing to maturity in Christ.

In addition to setting a right life goal, having the right attitude and following the right examples, having the right hope is essential. In verses 18-21 there is a contrast between those whose hope is in earthly things and those whose hope is in heaven. Look at 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.”

In verses 1-11, Paul dealt with legalism. In verses 12-21 Paul deals with the other enemy of the gospel, antinomianism, meaning “against the law.” They claim that Christ gives perfect freedom, so they can do whatever they want, even sin. They say, “God forgives us, no matter what we do.” They misuse God’s grace as an excuse to commit sin. Paul warns about them using a different kind of strong language, saying with tears, “many live as enemies of the cross of Christ” (18). These people called themselves Christians and talked like Christians, but the way they lived was as enemies of the cross of Christ. They did not like the cross. They liked everything else about Christian life, but not the cross. They liked prosperity, miracles, love fellowship, marrying a Christian spouse, and Christian music and art. But they were offended by the cross of Christ.

The problem is if you remove the cross, there is no Christianity. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). The cross is the very center of Christianity. Paul said, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal 6:14). So we must love not only the cross necklace, but the cross of Jesus in our practical lives. However, these enemies of the cross misuse God’s grace. They say that they will be forgiven no matter how they live, so they do not struggle to restrain their sinful desires. Rather, they enjoy themselves freely, making their faith a license to indulge in every sort of corruption. We call them “antinomian.” Paul presented their position in Romans 6:1: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” And again in Romans 6:15: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Paul’s answer to the two questions was, “By no means!” In Galatians 5:13 he said, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” God gave us perfect freedom through Jesus Christ. It is the freedom to come to God as we are anytime, anywhere, and the freedom to serve others in love. It is not freedom to indulge the sinful nature. In verse 19, Paul exposed the destiny and characteristics of enemies of the cross, saying, “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” In our times as well we need to be aware of these enemies of the cross.

Now, in verses 20-21, Paul talks about the hope that Christians should have: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior 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.” We Christians have two citizenships while we live on earth. One is to our native land. This is a temporary citizenship. It is not effective after death. But our other citizenship is in heaven, and it lasts forever. This is the most valuable citizenship. We should have pride as citizens of heaven more than national pride. Also, we have to put our hope in heaven, not in this world. Our King is not a worldly ruler, but our Lord Jesus Christ - our Savior. Paul said, “We eagerly await a Savior...the Lord Jesus Christ....” This refers to Jesus’ Second Coming. When he comes, Jesus will bring everything under his control and will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. Our transformed bodies will not be perishable, but imperishable; they will not be dishonorable, but glorious; they will not be weak, but powerful; they will not be natural, but spiritual (1 Cor 15:42-44). Apostle John tells us how having this hope affects our lives: “But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 Jn 3:2b-3).

Our citizenship is in heaven. That is what keeps us going: We belong in heaven. This is a different perspective from that of the world around us, where the here and now is so important. The key to living victoriously on earth is to develop the mind-set of heaven. Paul doesn’t tell us to ignore the fact that we live in the world, to shirk our responsibilities, to walk around with our heads in the clouds, but he tells us to live our lives in light of eternity, with the assurance of the promise of heaven. This world isn’t our home. Let us press on toward the goal of the kingdom of God.