

The greatest threat to man's well-being is not other men nor natural disasters. But man's greatest threat lies in his own heart. And that threat can be summarized with two words: Pride and regret. These two things can eat away at our sense of well-being and lead to our loss of hope and ultimately to our death. But this is not God's plan for his children, whom he loves. This morning we're going to talk about this and about what it has to do with our walk with him and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

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. ¹³ 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 toward what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

When Paul wrote, **“Not that I have already obtained all this” (v.12)**, he was referring back to what he had written in the previous paragraph: **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead” (vv.10-11)**. Paul longed **“to know Christ,”** even if it meant suffering as he followed him.

“To know Christ”: Paul was walking the talk, acknowledging that he hadn't arrived at his final goal, that God was not done with him yet. But he was on a journey. And what a journey it was!

Elsewhere he wrote that, **“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was nearly stoned to death, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from**

Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked” (2nd Corinthians 11:24-27).

How much Paul suffered for Christ may not be news to you. But what catches my attention is how he kept going; he continued his fight for the Gospel despite the brutal resistance he faced day after day.

When I lived in Philadelphia, I led an organization that did community development in the inner city. All was going swimmingly for three years until we tried to bring a program into our own church. There was a faction that didn't like it. I guess they were used to being in control. At a church council meeting, they became accusatory and slanderous. And I gave it right back to them. My mistake. The meeting ended with a standoff.

The Sunday after our little shouting match, a member of that faction sicced three of her thug friends on me, who put me in the hospital. And I gave up. Three years of hard work, up in smoke. I had a call from God and his church to do that work. But after one beating, I was done. The devil won. But what would've come of St. Paul's ministry if he had given up after one beating, if the devil had won so easily?

He wrote, **“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (v.12)**. Jesus had already taken hold of Paul, and so he determined from the git-go he wouldn't let anything nor anybody nor any condition in his own heart or mind get in the way of that. Indeed, Paul turned his experience with suffering around. He wasn't discouraged by it, but he felt affirmed! His thinking went something like, “Since everyone is trying to kill me, I must be doing something right!”

Through my experience in Philly, I have learned about Satan's two favorite weapons in his war against humanity. The first is pride: He will encourage a person to believe he is the source of his own success and power, that he's a self-made man, that he's self-sufficient, and he alone is responsible for all that he has become. And then the devil will let him fall and leave him broken and alone.

But the devil has another weapon, one he's honed to perfection. This one he uses with stealth and cunning, dismembering his enemy limb from limb. This one

works especially well with Christians. It is regret. Feed a Christian's conscience with enough regret for mistakes he's made, sins he's committed, and for his character defects, and while he may not lose faith, he will lose his will and his passion to serve the Lord and the church. He will doubt his value as a member of the Body of Christ, and he will not volunteer any more. He will not even have a word of encouragement for his brother, for he's lost confidence in his relationship with God.

Paul wrote, **"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (vv.13-14)**. Before his conversion, Paul had been on a mission to destroy the Christian community. But Jesus set him right. But that was not the end of his journey, for what would have happened if he had merely chosen to believe in Christ but had lost his appetite for service, if he had lost himself in his shame for his past misdeeds? He would never have planted two dozen churches in Asia Minor nor written his 13 letters which make up half the New Testament.

Paul chose a better path than wallowing in self-pity. He took hold of that for which Christ took hold of him. He made a conscious decision to forge ahead. He imagined himself as an athlete, a runner with a singularity of focus, every fiber of his being dedicated to finishing the race. Nothing would distract him. He did not have the time to ponder his past failures. But he strove for the finish line.

Regrets for failures is probably the undoing of many, many Christians. How many times have I been stifled—how many times have you been stifled—from serving the Lord because of a bad experience in our past? I shut down the operations of a whole non-profit organization because I got a black eye and my feelings hurt. But **"Christ took hold of me"**! Please say it with me: (**"Christ took hold of me."**)

Like a runner, Paul committed his whole being—his eyes, his mind, every muscle in his body—to **"what lies ahead."** Nothing distracted him from the finish line. Like a runner, he was not thinking about his past failures or about "what other's must be thinking." But he was focused on the prize at the finish line. Unlike the Roman games, which gave the winner a withered wreath of celery leaves, the prize Paul anticipated was one of **"surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus,"** as we read a few verses earlier (**Philippians 3:8**).

“Christ took hold of me” (v.12): Jesus knew you and me before we were born, and he visited us in our baptisms and in his supper. Time and again, Christ has taken hold of us. He doesn’t look at what we were or what we have done. But he looks at us as his children, a people equipped with everything we need to complete the work he’s called us to do. **“Christ took hold of me.”** Please say it with me again: (**“Christ took hold of me.”**)

Brothers and sisters, Jesus death and resurrection from the grave are our death and resurrection from the regret and sorrow and sadness we have carried around in our hearts, those things which would get in the way of our pursuit of God.

Paul closed this section, writing **“let us live up to what we have already attained” (v.16)**. To **“live up to”** is better translated as **“conformed,”** which was a military term at the time, meaning, “fall in line,” conform to what you see me doing. Paul’s saying, as you see me overcome defeat by forgetting the past and pushing forward, do the same.

When I was in junior high school, I ran the mile. My coach used to tell us that being a distance runner is not about how you start, but it’s about how you finish. “Remember your training; pace yourself; finish the race; and you’ll do just fine,” he would say.

Remember your training; pace yourself; and finish the race: That’s Paul’s teaching here. Christ has taken hold of us, so let us take hold of him, focused on him, concentrated on our calling, pouring our hearts into the fulfillment of the work he’s already started among us, striving for the prize of **“knowing Christ”** in his glory.

This week let us consider those things which have gotten in the way of our walk with the Lord. What’s holding us back? What has broken us? And after we have completed this self-reflection, let’s forget these things which have hurt us in our hearts once and for all. For our Lord has forgiven us; he’s given us his Spirit; and he’s sent us on a mission to our community.

This week let us begin anew our walk with God and one another, striving **“toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called (us) heavenward in Christ Jesus” (v.14).**

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.