

## **Paul's One Passion and Bethel's Great Need**

### **Philippians 3:12**

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The first weekend in September is when things really get going for us around here. The summer is over. School is back in full swing. Everyone is finally back from summer vacations. We often have guests visiting for the first time. Welcome to all of you. Thank you for coming to Bethel Church. We hope your time with us draws your hearts toward God and potentially joining with what God is doing here.

What God is doing here is what I want to spend two weekends of teaching on. These two messages are for the Crown Point campus only. I want to talk about where we are as a campus and where we think we need to go. Am I saying there is a need here? I remember the excitement Jennifer and I had when our daughter was born a year ago. There was all the preparation, all the anticipation, and then the day came. Birth. It sounds glorious and it was, but it also was an incredible effort on Jennifer's part. When Kiralee was born, we were overjoyed, but Jennifer was exhausted and in need of recovery. Birthing takes its toll, doesn't it?

For our Crown Point campus, over the past two years we have gone through labor and birthed triplets—three additional campuses. The expenditure of energy, the sending of many (hundreds) of our best people to establish them, and the substantial financial investment has us now asking the question, how are we doing here at Crown Point? Does Momma need a little recovery? If so, what does that look like?

Our passage this weekend is Philippians 3:12-16. I will get to those verses, but I want to start with the preceding five verses. In verses four and following, Paul lists his religious accomplishments, and they are substantial.

*"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may 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 from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."* (Philippians 3:7-11)

Here Paul does a value comparison. On the one side is his resume and pedigree. It is all very impressive by human standards. He had the right bloodline, the right degree from the right school, the right job and impressive role. He was famous for his leadership as chief prosecutor for the leading organization of its day. And even of his own moral and spiritual attainments, he says he was *blameless*. Paul was a Type A achiever and his human resume stacked up against anyone of his day, and our day as well.

Yet in verses 7 and 8 he says that those things mean nothing to him compared to one thing—gaining Christ. Gain Christ? What does that mean? Verse 10 describes it as knowing him. Knowing his power. Knowing him in his sufferings and death. And knowing his same resurrection from the dead. Gaining Christ is a summary statement for the totality of

salvation through Christ—all the promises, all the benefits, the entire spiritual journey, all the eternal benefits—and most importantly, him personally.

This leads to verse 12 and following: "*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way.*" (Philippians 3:12-15)

First-century Greeks loved athletics. Sound familiar? Wrestling, boxing, and running events were hugely popular. Philippi was a Greek city not too far from Athens, the birthplace of the Olympic Games. It was a Greek who ran 26.2 miles from Marathon to Athens, declaring Greece's victory over Persia. He ran into the city, yelled "Victory!" then fell over dead. Some of you training for the Chicago marathon should keep that in mind.

Paul draws on the picture of an athlete straining for the finish line, as a picture of his own spiritual life. I take the gaining of Christ in verse 7, "making it my own" in verse 12, and *the prize* in verse 14 as all describing Paul's big goal. His finish line. His gold medal. What is it? Or rather, who is it? It's Jesus.

### **Jesus is the Prize and the Goal of the Christian Life**

Some of us may be confused by Paul's language here. You think to yourself, *I already have Jesus. I have already believed in him, so why all this talk of sweat and effort and Christian marathon running? I don't have to do anything, do I?*

Here is where people get confused. Is salvation completely by faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross? Yes. A thousand times yes. "*Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.*" (Augustus M. Toplady, *Rock of Ages*) The gospel is that Jesus lived the life I could not live and he died a death I should have died. The result of his death in my place is a free offer of forgiveness of sins to all who believe. When I believe, I most certainly have Jesus and I always will.

However, as clear as the Bible is on salvation by faith, it also says those who trust Jesus love him and treasure him more than anything else. He has wonderfully changed our lives and our hearts. Could such a supernatural thing happen within us and not change us? All of Paul's sweaty and straining language reflects that heart change. It is the result of it, not the cause of it. Like that runner from Marathon to Athens, was it victory because he ran or did he run because it was victory?

The Christian life is the same. "*We love because he first loved us.*" (1 John 4:19) It's called "new life." We are a "new creation," with a "new heart," and we are living now in "newness of life." *Great. Sounds wonderful. But what is so new about it?* This new love and life produces a byproduct of a great desire to **serve** Christ. This new life and love produces great **sacrifice** for Christ. This new life and love produces great effort and **sweat** for Christ and his work in this world. We ought to find ourselves with a new priority for living, seeking first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). Do we drum up this holy ambition to be saved? Are we victorious because we run to Athens? No, we run because we've won.

Look at the words Paul uses, Run. Press. Strain. Verse 13 is particularly rigorous. "*But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...*"

## **Forgetting all that lies behind**

Isn't this always the danger? It's like Lot's wife, looking back. Living in the past. Thinking our Sodom experience was the best. Looking back to some spiritual high point or accomplishment. If you are running, is it wise to run forward and not look behind. Great runners always look forward. All their training and preparation is for this one race; this one moment. The athletes that don't have this focus, you never hear of them. They don't win. They don't make the team, they don't go the Olympics. They end up preaching sermons in Northwest Indiana on the weekends.

Today's athletes will discipline themselves and push themselves for maximum performance. Sometimes they start training as children. I remember years ago I had the chance to visit Lake Placid, New York, the site of the 1980 Winter Olympics. It still has an Olympic training facility. When we visited, the ice rink was filled with very young girls, twirling and jumping who were six, seven, eight years old. They were from all over the country, living there full-time. They were training every day hoping and convinced that they were the next American to win skating gold.

Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 9:25, if athletes will give that effort for a prize that passes away, what kind of service for Christ should we offer for an eternal reward?

## **Straining forward to what lies ahead**

The picture is vivid. A runner giving all his effort. Eyes focused. Head not moving. Body in motion. Not backwards. See video clip here: [Sprint Form Slow Motion](#)

What is Paul reaching for? He says it this way, at the end of his life, in 2 Timothy 4:7-8—"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day."

*Pastor Steve, would you just say what you want to say and quit beating around the biblical bush?* OK. Here's what I want to say. We just birthed triplets. Caring for them has meant sending hundreds of our best people to other campuses. Most of these people were extremely involved here; the kind who do the heavy lifting. These people are easy to spot; they almost have spiritual beads of sweat on the foreheads. Leaders. Servants. Many of them the welcoming type. Hospitable. When there was a need they heard about, they were willing to step in. Faithful. They are taking their energy and helping us reach Gary, Southwest Lake County, and the cities of Hobart and Portage for Christ. We still have lots of people who attend here and we still are blessed with many wonderful servants at this campus, just not as many as we used to.

What is needed now here at Crown Point? More than ever before, we need runners. We need to forget what lies behind and press toward what lies ahead. We need everyone here engaged in quality effort and ministry for Jesus.

I had lunch last week with two brand new families to our church. Both just moved to the area. Both were heavily involved in previous churches. I didn't tell them, "We're so awesome we don't need you." I said the opposite, "You are coming at a time of tremendous need." One of the blessings of a multisite church is that it creates so many more opportunities to serve. A single site church has single site needs. Now with four campuses, we have four times the needs and opportunities.

I know we have many seasoned Christians who used to serve with vibrancy but not so much anymore. Can I lovingly say, forgetting what lies behind, press forward to what lies ahead? I once heard Pastor David Jeremiah say, "You can know the vibrancy of your faith by how old your illustrations are." Today is a new day and a new opportunity.

We need forget about what lies behind. Sometimes people are paralyzed in serving Christ by something in the past. A hurt. A disappointment in a church leader. *Forget what lies behind.* Maybe you simply rest on an accomplishment of the past or past service or you live vicariously through your adult children who serve for Christ. *Forget what lies behind.* Today is a new day to strain forward. God is opening doors to us all over Northwest Indiana; it calls for us to give our best effort for Jesus. Press on. Strain. As missionary David Livingstone said, "I'll go anywhere as long as it's forward."

Realize that *we are not planting campuses, we are planting people.* The church is people. As people follow God's leading and serve faithfully in these other campuses, it means God's people here need to do so as well.

Next week we will talk about what that looks like. Let me remind you of the urgency of this.

Northwest Indiana has half a million people who do not attend any church of any kind. They have no visible faith expression in anything, much less Jesus. Jesus' final words are guiding us to make disciples. How do we honor him in doing that? Like Paul, to say in my heart, my one thing is "*forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*" (Philippians 3:13-14)

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