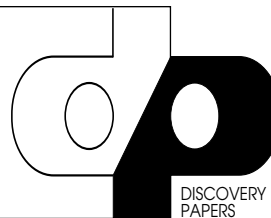


ASCERTAINING HOPE IN THE LORD

SERIES: JESUS, OUR JOY



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Philippians 3:12-21
Fifth Message
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For a long time I have been convinced of the importance of healthy role models. Having spent over ten years working with teenagers, I am painfully aware of the impact these models can have in their lives. Our youth need significant adults to come alongside of them and portray in flesh and blood what life will be like when they grow up. As a father, I know there are two little boys always watching and learning from me.

My son Stephen reminded me of the importance of flesh and blood examples when I was putting him to bed one evening. After two stories, a prayer and two glasses of water, he finally admitted that he could not sleep because he was afraid. I assured him that Jesus was with him and would take care of him, but I was not prepared for his quick reply. He responded, "That won't help tonight, Dad. I need someone I can see and touch." I have pondered that statement often since then.

Because God knows we are all like my son, he has always used incarnation to communicate truth. It is one thing for a five-year-old to hear that God is a Father who loves and takes care of him and another to have a Daddy take him into his arms and hold him. Truth is easier to grasp when it is clothed in flesh and blood. I am convinced that all of Christian life is like this. Truth is more easily caught than taught.

In the book of Philippians, Paul has given us many models. He reminded us of Epaphroditus, Timothy and the Lord Jesus himself. In Philippians 3:12-21, Paul now presents himself as a model and tells us to follow his example. In fact, he will later write, "The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things." God is always in the process of turning theology into biography.

In the last message, we were reminded of Paul's dramatic encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. There he discovered that everything he had been living for and everything that he had been counting on to make him righteous was loss. It was "dung" in God's sight. As a result, he turned his back on all of that and decided to allow Jesus Christ to satisfy all of his needs. This was the testimony of his salvation experience.

In the last half of chapter 3, Paul gives us the testimony of his Christian growth. He shares with us his determination for the remainder of his life and twice calls us to follow his example. Surrounding these commands are two predominant ideas about the Christian life. First, he reminds us that we have a goal to obtain, that the Christian life requires personal commitment, effort and determination. And secondly, he tells us that we have a Savior to be awaited, and so our Christian life rests on great certainties. The Christian life is therefore a life of consecration and conviction.

As you contemplate 1988 and future growth in your own life, it is my prayer that you will follow Paul's example. In this passage, he holds up a model of what growth ought to look like in the Christian life. First, let us look at his call to

consecration in verses 12 to 16.

I. A CALL TO CONSECRATION: WE HAVE A GOAL TO OBTAIN

Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; 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. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

These verses fall into two sections: Paul's example in verses 12 to 14 and his exhortation in verses 15 and 16. Paul is confident that the life he has been able to live is not only exemplary but normative for all Christians. In each section, we will learn a principle concerning the process of our growth. The first principle is drawn from Paul's example.

A. Christian Growth is a Demanding Process

One of the wonderful truths we have learned in this book is that our salvation is secure because it comes by faith and not our own effort.

Progress in the Christian life involves cultivating a concentration upon the goal

However, this certainty is never an excuse for passivity in the Christian life. These verses display an impressive activity. When Paul discusses his own growth, he talks of shouldering a responsibility as if he were performing a job that needs to be done. In fact, in looking at Paul's example, I notice four elements of growth.

1. Growth Involves A Correct Self-estimate

Paul says this in two ways: "I do not consider that I have made it my own" and "not that I have already obtained it." Once upon a time, Paul thought he had arrived, for he judged himself to be "blameless as to the righteousness under the law." However, his encounter with Jesus Christ gave him a new perception beginning with himself. Now he can see himself with new eyes and knows that sinless perfection is not the experience of anyone, even an apostle, this side of glory.

"I do not consider that I have made it my own" is an admirable thing to say, especially in Paul's position of leadership. It is easy for a Christian leader to become so

wrapped up in the demands and concerns of others that he forgets about his own growth, to be so concerned with exhorting others to prayer and the reading of Scripture that he allows his own discipline to become perfunctory or even negligible. But Paul does not see himself in this light. In terms of his own Christian life, he sees himself as a brother among brethren. Paul does not say, "I would love to take time to pursue my own growth, but there are needs that must be met first." No, his humility, the correct view of himself, allowed him to see his own need to grow. Christ had brought Paul a different self-estimate than that which his Pharisaic upbringing had offered. This humility was Paul's springboard to progress.

There is a second element involved in growth.

2. Growth Involves A Single-minded Zeal

Verse 13 literally says, "One thing! Forgetting what lies behind..." What a motto for 1988! What did Paul forget? I do not think Paul forgot God's past mercies or the valuable lessons which God had already taught him. In fact, he has already discussed both of these in this book.

Paul longs for us to avoid the kind of dwelling on the past that hinders our present efforts and future progress. Have you ever experienced this kind of paralysis? Maybe you are harboring bitterness over a past wrong (either real or imaginary). Perhaps you are paralyzed by a past sin and doubt you will ever be forgiven. Maybe past decisions which have resulted in your present circumstances leave you wondering, "If only..." or "I should have..."

It was a great day in my life when my son Joel said to me, "Dad, why do you always say 'I should have'?" We now have a new game in our house. "Should have" is not allowed in our vocabulary. Every time I say it, I have to pay some money. We cannot allow our past to paralyze us.

In contrast, progress in our Christian life involves cultivating a concentrated forward look upon the goal. This zeal includes not only concentration but determination. Look at the phrases he uses: "I press on...reaching forward...I press on." "Reaching forward" is an athletic metaphor picturing a runner who is totally extended, stretching with every part of his body to reach the tape and win the race. "Press on" is the same word Paul used earlier to refer to his persecution of the church. In other words, it means, "I press on, I pursue, I persecute." Paul is pursuing the goal with dogged determination.

The athletic metaphor reminded me of something Bart Starr, a former quarterback of the Green Bay Packers, said concerning his coach, Vincent Lombardi:

I wasn't mentally tough before I met Coach Lombardi. I hadn't reached the point where I refused to accept second best. I was too nice at times...To win, you have to have a certain amount of mental toughness. Coach Lombardi gave me that. He taught me that you must have a flaming desire to win. It's got to dominate all your waking hours. It can't ever wane. It's got to glow in you all the time.

That last phrase stuck with me. That is Paul and his single-minded zeal, glowing all the time! This is far different from the "letting go and letting God" mentality. Growth involves impressive activity.

There is a third element of Christian growth.

3. Growth Involves An Absorbing Desire

What holds Paul's attention as he turns from the past and looks to the future? It is "the goal...the prize." If it is "to lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ," what did Christ have in mind when he took hold of Paul? Surely Paul is speaking of being conformed to the image of Jesus himself.

But Paul purposely does not describe this goal in detail. His words are more impressive for this lack because one scriptural picture after another fills our mind as we think about the prize. We think of the Lord's welcome when we will see him, "Well done, good and faithful servant." There is also "the crown of righteousness" which the righteous Judge will award on that day. And we look forward to "the unfading crown of glory." Revelation speaks of the blood-cleansed robes and the unending presence of the Lord himself. In addition, we are reminded of the "things which eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him." All of this is what Paul has in mind.

Growth is an absorbing desire to obtain the goal and receive the prize.

There is a fourth characteristic:

4. Growth Involves A Sure Foundation

This last element puts all of our activity into perspective. We are not motivated into action by panic, trying to attain something of which we are basically unsure. Paul describes the prize of this disciplined activity as belonging to "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The idea of "calling" in Paul's epistles does not imply God's invitation to be saved but God's determination to save. God's calls are irrevocable. This prize is part of and guaranteed by God's saving purposes at work in all of his called children. Our final salvation, with all its glories and rewards, was secured for us by God calling us in Christ.

Christian growth is a demanding process. Do not let anyone kid you! It is not going to come down a conveyor belt for you to pick up. It involves all the small decisions you will make this year. Although growth is guaranteed, it still involves effort.

There is a second principle concerning our growth as Christians. It is found in Paul's exhortation in verses 15 and 16.

B. Christian Growth is a Personal Process

In these verses, we discover what bearing Paul's experience is to have on our own lives. He reminds us that his apostolic example is the pattern for all Christians. Paul is confident in his apostolic authority and believes that all mature believers will approve and model the principles upon which he has based his life.

However, even though he possessed this authority, the spirit in which he writes is far from authoritarian. He exercises authority, not dictatorship. He is an apostle, not a pope! Notice he calls the Philippians "brethren." The "I" in verse 14 becomes "us" in verse 15. When he faces the fact that not everyone will concur with his teaching, his word is not one of intolerance but of assurance. He does not respond, "I am the judge in such matters!" Instead, he says, "God will reveal it to

them.”

In so doing, Paul demonstrates a vital element of growth. He calls each Christian to his own personal responsibility before the Lord. This is important! The basis for our personal decisions is not arbitrary; it is the “standard to which we have already obtained.” In other words, the objective truth revealed by Christ in the Scriptures is our standard. Paul is not envisioning each person stubbornly maintaining his own personal whims, regardless of the truth. Instead, he sees a situation in which each believer must work out his own understanding of the Christian life based upon the Scriptures.

Paul understands that real education and growth involves risk, for they have to make room for trial and error. A child guarded by over-protective parents from every hazard in life and every negative result of his own behavior will never emerge from childhood. The same is true spiritually. God “has taken a risk” in giving us his word. Spiritual environments which attempt to provide heavy control complete with all the answers, to shoulder all the responsibilities and to cushion from every adversity sound safer. But such safety has a high price tag—often stagnation in spiritual infancy. We need the “trial and error” of living by Scripture in order to discover what the Bible teaches. Once we have put it to the test, then we can discover where we were mistaken and try again.

Paul assures us that the risk is not that great. There is a God who is over all whose irresistible purpose is to make us like his Son. As we obey the truth he has already given us, he will take charge of the process. When we are in error, he “will reveal it to us.” Christian growth is a personal process.

Having exhorted us to follow his example, Paul now tells us why. Look at verses 17 to 21.

II. A CALL TO CONVICTION: WE HAVE A SAVIOR TO AWAIT

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from whom also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has to subject all things to Himself.

Paul has already outlined his manner of life and called us to imitation. When Paul commands us to follow his example, he gives an explanation. Notice the word “for” in verse 18. When we follow his example, we will live a life in accordance with two important events, the cross and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul calls us to remember these two events because as we follow his example our lives will agree with them. Paul starts with the cross.

A. Remember the Cross—Our Life is Not Our Own

The cross was always central in Paul’s teaching, for it revealed to him that no one but Christ could bring him to God. Through the cross, he discovered new life. And through the

cross, he learned that life comes through death rather than self-effort, religious background, powerful personality or intellect. Resurrection power is discovered through death—putting aside the flesh and all of its strengths and abilities and drawing upon the life of Christ within.

In order to sharpen our awareness of what he is asking of us, Paul gives us a negative example. Thus, he calls attention to the life he requires by contrasting it with the life he rejects. In other words, we shall see what to follow if we know what to avoid.

The lifestyle we are to avoid is lived by those whom Paul describes as “enemies of the cross of Christ.” Even in the Christian community, there are people whose lives violate the principle that life comes from death, that strength is discovered in weakness, that true adequacy is found in inadequacy. As long as they live in that violation, they make themselves enemies of the cross of Christ.

Paul says their end is destruction. This means more than eternal loss. “Destruction” could be translated “waste” or “lostness.” It speaks of a wasted life, the loss of everything that makes life meaningful. Jesus said, “He who tries to save his life will surely lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it.” This is an important truth to be learned. Self-denial (the denial of our false, fallen self) is not the road to self-destruction. It is, in fact, the road to self-discovery.

Self-denial is not the road to self-destruction, but the road to self-discovery

In describing these men, the first item Paul mentions is their devotion to self-indulgence—“their god is their appetite.” They recognize no need or authority outside of personal satisfaction. Their appetites dictate their lives. Refusing to bring them under control, they have accorded them the place of lordship and worship. They are sensual, living life primarily to please their five senses.

The second item Paul mentions is a reversal of moral standards and values. He says their “glory is their shame.” In other words, they exalt things they ought to be ashamed of. Clearly this is the next stage in the downward spiral. First, they give themselves to indulgence, and then they justify themselves by saying their behavior is proper and allowable. Their public code of ethics is rooted in their life of self-indulgence.

Finally, Paul pinpoints their problem: the cultivation of an earthly mind. They “set their minds on earthly things.” At the vital center of their being, where life finds its direction and attitudes are formed which ultimately influence our decisions and govern our tastes, the world and its ways are the focus of their attention.

Paul goes to great length to describe the lifestyle of these enemies of the cross. We are to remember them because their lives are a warning. Thus we have two lifestyles set before us as examples. One is based upon the principle of the cross, a life of self-denial. The other is based upon being an enemy of the cross, a life of self-indulgence. Paul says the cross is the source of our power. We are to glory in it, for it has given us everything that is ours. This is the first truth we must remember, the first conviction upon which we are to base our

life. Remember the cross; our life is not our own.

The second event which Paul brings to our mind looks to the future rather than the past. The understanding of this event will also prevent us from degenerating spiritually.

B. Remember His Coming—This World Is Not Our Home

Paul again changes the pronoun from “I” to “we” in verse 20 as he speaks about the common hope of all believers. Thus, we see the close tie between the cross and the second coming of Christ. These two events are central to our belief.

Look at the contrast between the enemies of the cross and those who love it. The former are heading for destruction, while we are waiting for a Savior from heaven. The enemies are devoted to their bodies, bowing to their appetites as to a god. But we, quite the contrary, are looking forward to the transformation of this body, for we view it as “the body of our humiliation.” They have a perverted standard of values, glorying in shameful things. We have a clearer perspective, having an appreciation even now of Christ’s glory. Finally, they are earthbound while our citizenship is in heaven.

In making these distinctions, Paul does not call us lovers or friends of the cross. Rather, he describes us as “watchers of the return.” The closeness of the cross and the coming is noteworthy. Paul could just as easily have described the enemies of the cross as hostile to the Lord’s return, for to deny the return is to fail to appreciate the cross. To forget the return is to lose hold of the excellence of the cross.

Paul reminds us that we are citizens of heaven. We belong to a far-off homeland and await the king who will take us

there. Our names are already on the citizenship roster, and our place is secure. But while we wait, we must live as if we were already there. The primary feature of our heavenly home is the presence of the king. This is also our present privilege. We are to be occupied with the goal of being conformed to the image of Christ, united in his death so that we can experience his resurrection. In heaven, all things obey his will. We must give ourselves to this same obedience now. In heaven, the reality of his almighty power is evident and experienced. Paul reminds us this same power is at work in our daily lives. C. S. Lewis says:

Hope is one of the theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next...It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth “thrown in.” Aim at earth and you will get neither.

As we think of 1988 and the growth God desires for our lives, I pray that you will remember these two cardinal Christian events. Remember the cross. As you do, you will remember your life is not your own. And remember his coming. This world is not our home. Our focus and desire is to obtain a goal. As a runner reaches for the tape, so should we reach for maturity.

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