

## Pressing on with Purpose

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Dated: 02.06.2019

Scripture: Philippians 3:1-14

Last weekend, I had the privilege of being with the faculty and staff of SAIACS Bible College, Bangalore, leading them in a retreat. Retreats are always interesting occasions because, being overnight, one has to spend the night with people one has never dealt with before. The games they play at retreats are very task-oriented, and you find people who are normally very quiet suddenly get very competitive. Some of you are smiling so I guess that you're very competitive yourselves.

Also, at the retreats, you are put with a roommate for the night; and heaven forbid that you are a snorer. Then you are really in trouble! I confess I'm a snorer. Sheila has been sanctified through these 37 years through my snoring; so I consider it a gift that I have given to her – but she doesn't see it that way.

How many of you are snorers here? I thought so. The hands always go this way (making an action as to pointing to the next person) isn't it? It's not me, but my spouse. I remember when I was in Atlanta a few years back for a conference, and I was sharing a room with an African-American gentleman. I thought I needed to come clean with him before we turned in for the night, so I said, "I have a confession to make." He looked at me and said, "What's wrong? What do you have to say?" So I said, "I need to tell you that I am a snorer." He said, "Aw! I thought you were going to tell me you're some serial killer or something like that." I replied, "No! Just a snorer!" He said, "Don't worry about it. I'll sleep well." So we went to bed and I slept really well. I got up the next morning and looked at him and he was all weary-eyed as if he hadn't slept a wink. He looked at me and said, "You don't snore; you roar!" (Laughter fills the church).

A few months later, I was in a pastors' retreat at Lonavala, and as usual I went ahead saying, "I'm a snorer. So if you are putting me together with somebody, just warn them." The organizers thought that it would be good to have two snorers share the room. So I was placed with this very senior gentleman, and as we settled down for the night, he looked at me and said, "You're a snorer too!" and I said, "Yes, I try." "Well," he said, "we'll manage. We'll be fine." So we both turned in. Unfortunately, he went to sleep before I did. I have never heard snoring like that before. I kid you not. He would go on – khrrrh, hehe hehe, purr. And then at one point, it was – ah ah amazing... It was a song I always loved till that night. I had enough of it. Amazing grace didn't help me through that night. He woke up the next morning all bright-eyed and I was the bleary-eyed one. He looked at me and said, "You don't snore; you purr." I replied, "And you roar." (Laughter).

But all this to say that as I was reading through Philippians, I thought to myself – here is Paul in a very unique position. He's tied to Roman guards and they are with him 24 hours of the day. And this un-theological thought crossed my mind – I wonder whether Paul snored! These poor guards – they had nowhere to go; they were tied to him and would have had to listen to him all day. I thought that should have given Paul a bit of satisfaction. But, knowing Paul, that wouldn't have given him any satisfaction.

Philippians 3:1-14 (NASB)

*Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.*

*Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.*

*But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

*Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that 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.*

Our Father, would you speak to us Lord, through your Holy Spirit that we may be able to glean truth that will change our lives, that would re-align us with Your holy will, that would connect us once again with You, that would help us to enjoy the journey that we have and the fellowship that we should have with you Master. So take these verses Lord, out of this page and apply it to our hearts and our minds, for we pray this in Your name, Lord Jesus.

Paul says, "Finally", meaning that he is coming to the end of this epistle. But then he says, "To write the same things again is no trouble for me and it's a safeguard for you." In other words, he says that repetition is something that is good because he can keep saying things that will help stick in their minds. He's talked about a lot of things, themes that have surfaced in other writings, as well. In 1:6 he says, *"I'm confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to its completion until the day of Christ Jesus,"*

That has been such a stimulant for us as we've seen our lives and thought – Lord, have I lost steam? Am I in Your will? Have I forgotten what it is to finish? But then we are reassured in this particular verse that He who has begun a good work, beloved, in you, will, will, will carry on. So we need to be encouraged with that. But then he goes on and talks about various people who are preaching about Jesus. He says that they are preaching out of self, they are preaching out of envy and strife. He said, "We preach the truth, but," he humbly says, "it doesn't matter. All that matters is that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice." It doesn't matter that I don't get the glory for what is happening. When I was in seminary, I came across a one-liner that has continued to inspire, encourage and challenge me. It said: "There's no limit to what a man or a woman can do if he/she doesn't mind who gets the credit." It's sufficient that the name of Jesus is proclaimed. That's what he says here.

Then he goes on to say, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." There's this discussion that goes on in his mind – I'm tired. I've had it, and I've done everything. I've done these journeys; I've been beaten, put in jail, thrown off ships. I'm tired and ready to go up and be with the Lord that I have served and loved. But if I stay here it will be good for you all. And he has been proved right. We are beneficiaries of the writings that have come out of these prison epistles. But then he goes on in the great Kenosis chapter 2:5, "*Have this attitude in yourself that was also in Christ Jesus.*" For us to have the attitude that Jesus had, that He left everything and came down for us.

Then in chapter 3 he says, "*Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision.*" There are people all around who are talking all kinds of things and you need to be careful of these people. He calls them the false circumcision. And in amplifying what is false circumcision, he takes us to what is right circumcision, because he says, "for we are the true circumcision," and he lists 3 things:

- Who worship in the Spirit of God,
- Who glory in Christ Jesus,
- Who put no confidence in the flesh.

Sometimes the flesh is what gives us confidence in life – our pedigree, which family we've been born in, where we were born, what we have become, the status, the names that we have, the initials we have after our name, and so on. Paul says, "Listen, if there is anybody who has anything to talk about – it's me. I have everything. Look at me! Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. I can talk about pedigrees. If anybody can talk of pedigree, I can."

Then he says this: "But I consider it absolute rubbish." Then that begs the question: If that is rubbish for you Paul, what is important for you? And Paul would say, "Thank you for asking, because there are 7 or 8 things that I think are crucial for knowing who we are as Christians, and the kind of people that we ought to be. We need to set our hearts on the things that Paul is talking about in verses 8-11.

**1. 3:8 – to know Christ Jesus His Lord. Knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.**

I remember when I had just finished my seminary, we had to wait a year before we could actually come back to India, as there were no openings for us here. I was very upset as for seven years we had been preparing to go back to India, and suddenly there was no place for us. I remember praying and talking to the Lord, saying, "Lord, why is it like this?" I felt the Lord saying, "This year that you are going to be here, I want you to just know me." And I said, "Lord, that's what I've been doing for the last seven years," and He replied, "No! You've been learning everything about me; now I want you to get to know me."

I had a bad attitude about this, thinking that it was one year wasted. We could be going back home. Then a cousin visited and I told him why we were here and what God had said to me. As he was leaving, he asked to pray with me. As he prayed he said, "Lord, I thank You so much for giving Cecil this opportunity to get to know You in this year. What a gift it is to him." As I heard that, I was amazed. Truly! God was saying, "Here's one year just for you and Me to spend together, getting to know each other," and I was so resistant to it. And here Paul was saying, "to know Him, to get to know Him has surpassing joy; everything else is rubbish."

**2. 3:9 – to be found in Him.**

So often we see the words ‘in Him’ and we have no idea what it really means. I remember a preacher a long time back, explaining this to me. He said, (raising a bible in one hand) – Just imagine that this is Jesus and (raising pen in another hand) imagine that this is you. Then, putting the pen into the bible and closing it, if you were in Jesus, it would be like this – wherever Jesus went, you went; whatever Jesus did, you did; whatever attitude Jesus had, you had. That’s what it means to be ‘in Jesus’. Paul says, “To be in Him is priceless.” Are we in Him, beloved? Do we have His attitude? Do we subscribe to His will? Are we in alignment in His plans and His purposes? If we are in Jesus, that’s what must happen.

**3. 3:9 – having a righteousness that comes from God through faith.**

Again, he is thinking of the righteousness of the Pharisees, those people that He is having trouble with. He’s saying, “That’s not righteousness; that’s the righteousness that is built on the things that you do, on the works that you do. The righteousness that I am talking about is the righteousness you get by faith in the finished work of Jesus.” That’s the righteousness, the imputed righteousness of Jesus that sits upon us, “Come boldly before the throne room of grace.” That is the righteousness that Paul is looking for.

**4. 3:10 To know the power of His resurrection.**

Beloved, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is in us. That’s what the Bible says – the Holy Spirit raised Jesus and the Holy Spirit is within us. How often do we exercise His power? Ask yourselves that question: when was the last time that you said the power of Jesus is going to work in me in this particular situation, and you claim that power; you operate in that power. Sometimes we only use that power for demonic encounters. Yet the power that we have has the ability to break addictions, to break patterns in our own lives, to help us to change attitudes, to move from negativity to positivity. Have you used the power, beloved? Dunamis, dynamite power that is available to you and me. Or are we powerless? It’s like having a huge generator, and then using a candle. Paul saying – to be able to understand and to know the power of His resurrection within me.

**5. To know the fellowship of His suffering.**

I am always careful when I use the words ‘suffering and fellowship’. By nature, we don’t like suffering. Nobody does. Yet it seems that God will allow things into our lives that we have no answers for. It’s been a year or more and it doesn’t seem like there’s an end; it just goes on and on. And we cry out and ask God – why? Again, I would say as gently as I can, for those of you who are going through difficult times, especially those of you who came for prayer. The word that is most irrelevant at a time like this is ‘why’. Because we never have the full picture, and God does. If He is allowing these things into your life, He knows that you will come out triumphant. His grace is with you. He will carry you through it.

The word that we really need to ask in the midst of suffering is the word ‘how’. How do I navigate through this, Lord? How do I go through this difficult period in my life even if it’s been a long haul? Lord, You need to come and infuse me with energy. How do I stay on the straight and narrow during this time?

Paul is saying – I want to know You, the fellowship of Your suffering, that we too join with Jesus in the suffering that He went through. And somehow, that understanding will help us. We’ve got to trust God through that. Paul puts that down as one of the

prerequisites for moving on – to be able to embrace the suffering and the difficult times.

**6. 3:10 – to be conformed to His death.**

To be like Jesus in His death. What did Jesus encapsulate in His death? Love. There's tremendous amount of love for each one. He was dying for the world. "For the joy set before Him, He endured the Cross," says the writer of Hebrews. But with His dying breath, He couldn't let one person, who had lived like a robber through his life and suddenly realized it, perish. That kind of love in the face of death!

The willingness to suffer, to do the will of the Father.

Sometimes that's the hardest for us. Because we look at the things that God wants us to do and we say: Oh Lord, not that. That is too difficult. That's not me. That's not the way I'm equipped. Yet Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane said, "Lord, if this cup can pass from me, please let it pass. It's going to be difficult but then nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done." Do we come to that landing place where we say, - Lord, I'm struggling in this, really struggling. But still, Lord, I will say, "Let Your will be done."

**7. 3:11 – to attain to the resurrection from the dead.**

Will we be there when the trumpet sounds? Make sure! Paul is saying – I want to be there when that trumpet sounds. I'm home. Is that how we look at our end – with Jesus? To be able to look with great joy knowing that for us, it will not be the white throne judgment seat. For us, it will be the Bema Seat of Christ where He will ask us – what did you do with the things that I gave you?

What a wonderful thing to be able to spend an eternity with Jesus in heaven. Paul is saying that these are almost a preamble to how we walk our lives. Three things, he says, as we turn around and say, "Having put all these seven things into our lives, we then need to move on."

3:13 *"Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet, but one thing I do: and it's a work in progress. Paul says it's still happening with him. He goes on to say, "Here's the thing that I do –*

- Forgetting what lies behind
- Reaching forward to what lies ahead
- I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

**Forgetting what lies behind:** Sometimes the things of the past intrude into our present and spoil the future, because we live with those things. We live with those failures; every time we want to move ahead, Satan is able to bring up those failures and say, "My goodness, you couldn't do this and you are planning to do this for the Lord?" Then we quit and we settle for a mediocre walk with the Lord. And yet, as often as we come to this table, we hear these words, "If we confess our sins, then He is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Beloved, that's the antidote to sin in our lives; that's the antidote for dealing with things of the past – hand them over to the Lord and say, "Lord, forgive me and cleanse me and set me on the path that I can move forward. Or maybe there are indiscretions; said things that are not very tactful. Joseph is a classic example. He went to his brothers and told them his dreams, and it made them hate him even more. Then, as if one dream was not enough, he thought he'd share the second dream as well. That got him into the pit and on the way to Egypt. Sometimes we are tactless; we say things and then lose connections with people. And

then we sit down there. Maybe that's something that you and I need to deal with. Or compromises like Peter. There'd been an opportunity to speak for God and you didn't. And that continues to haunt you. The thing to do is to take it to the Lord and say, "Lord, I goofed. I made a mistake, Lord. Would You forgive me? Would You cleanse me; help me to stand in the gap the next time this happens.

Maybe, like we've prayed, it's just tiredness and fatigue, burnout. Or maybe there's no vision left in your life. You're just going through the motions by default. Or maybe there are broken or strained relationships in the past that just don't go away. Paul is saying – forget the things of the past.

Isaiah would speak to us in this situation Is 43:18-19,

Do not call to mind the former things,  
Or ponder things of the past.  
Behold, I will do something new,  
Now it will spring forth;  
Will you not be aware of it?  
I will even make a roadway in the wilderness,  
Rivers in the desert.

I wonder whether some of you just need to say, "Lord, I want to grab a hold of that scripture. Lord, I want streams in the desert, roadways in the wilderness. I want a new future. I want to leave the past behind. So forgetting what lies behind.....

Secondly, he says, **reaching forward to what lies ahead:**

Are we ready, beloved, to hold on to the things that God has for us? Are we ready? Are we in a position where we say, "Lord, whatever You have for me, I am going to embrace it. Do we have that mindset that, when it comes, we won't miss it? Do we have that kind of an attitude where we will be able to hear God calling and saying, "This is the way; walk ye in it"?

Or like Jonah, are you running away if you don't like what God is saying. That was classic with Jonah. He just didn't like the idea that God would forgive, so he headed in the opposite direction. Sometimes, that's the same thing with us. God tells us – This is what I want you to do. And then we say, Lord, this is not what I think should be done.

Consider Peter, when Jesus said, "I must suffer and I'll be taken and killed," Peter actually took Jesus aside and said, "Lord, forbid it that you should speak like this. This shall never happen to you." And the strongest words in scripture are reserved for Peter, a good, close friend, a confidante – Get thee behind me, Satan.

Are we in a position to hear God so that we can embrace the things that are in front of us?

Then finally, **to press on to the goal.**

Forgetting what lies behind, reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal. Paul amplifies this beautifully to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 4:7 he says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Are we fighting the good fight, beloved? Are we in those skirmishes, or are we just saying that this is not my fight? I'm just going to go through. Paul said, "I've fought the good fight." There are times when we have to fight, not in our strength, not in our power, but in the power and strength of God. I've finished the race. Are we running the race still or are we sitting by the side of the road?

Mark 10:46, the story of Bartimæus amplifies it so well. A blind beggar by the name of Bartimæus was sitting by the side of the road. Then he has the encounter with Jesus, and it

say, "He got up and followed Him on the road – from being a spectator to being a participant. Are you there to finish the race, or have you shifted out by sitting by the sidelines.

Then he says, "I've kept the faith." May I ask you this, church: is your faith as vibrant and exciting as it was on the first few weeks after you met the Lord? Or has it got jaded? Has it become just dull, cold, lukewarm? Has it been a long time since you got excited about anything to do with the Word of God or your prayer time or the things that God is doing in your life? Somebody said, "If you have to look three weeks back to find something good that God did in your life, you've backslidden." God continues to renew us – new things every moment, every day. Are we still excited about that?

I press on towards the goal. I want to end with this, and it's stuck right there in the middle – 14<sup>th</sup> verse. Why do we do all that? Why is Paul pushing, putting these criteria and then saying, "This is the way to press on." He answers this in verse 12, "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." Because Jesus has laid a hold on us, we must lay a hold on all of those seven criteria and then press on towards the goal. Forgetting what's behind, holding on to what's in front, and then moving on towards the goal because of what Jesus has done in our life.

Paul would elsewhere say, "For the love of God constraineth me." the Greek for the word constraineth is so difficult; in different translations, you would find compelled, constrained, moved, held – different words to just describe that one Greek word. Because it has two meanings: (1) to hold something in a vise, (2) to propel. Both those images are in what the love of God does and must do in our lives. Not only hold us firmly, but move us on the path that we need to move.

So I leave this with you, as we come to the Lord's Supper, do we need to make course corrections or alignments? Do we need to get back on our feet? Have we been on the mat for too long? Do we need to get a hole of God's vision again? Do we need to put in some of these seven points into our lives and say – everything else is rubbish. Let me now go after these. Then to be able to say – I press on. I will not relent. I press on for the highest calling that God has for me. Amen.