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## Special Message – The Journey

Philippians 3 | Sunday, May 20, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

### THE JOURNEY

#### Philippians 3

The Apostle Paul writes these words in Philippians, chapter 3. He begins with a very stern warning against some false teachers. Let's begin in verse 2:

*Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people 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 righteousness under the law, blameless. 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.*

*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, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*

*Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly*

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*body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.*

This is graduation season, so today and next Sunday I want to preach two messages that are directed toward students and toward graduates. We want to encourage our graduates as they launch into a new experience. We have a gift for you. We have a copy of Pilgrim's Progress, which is available at this front table. After the service, if you are a high school graduate, a college graduate, a graduate school graduate – if you have graduated from just about anything, you can come up and receive a free copy. I know we've got a number of people who have graduated, in different seasons of life. We want to honor you and encourage you as you take this next step.

When I was in high school, just a few years ago, they gave out some awards. I went to North Miami Senior High School. It was a large public high school on 135<sup>th</sup> Avenue in North Miami. Since then, they have actually torn down my high school. It was so old they tore it down and rebuilt it. That's how old I am. I know we all have different experiences. Some are home schooled. Some have gone to private school, some public school. But in my school we did this thing where we voted for people: the most and most likely. You know -- most popular, most beautiful, most likely to succeed. I think I remember that I actually received one of those awards. I just can't remember which one; most likely to forget or be forgetful, or something.

On the whole, I don't think that those recognitions were particularly helpful, but there was something that they represented. They were acknowledging that a season was coming to an end. They were part of a bigger message or a bigger climate of saying, "Hey, we're wrapping this up. High school is done and you are moving on to what's next." There was a sense of acknowledgment and anticipation as we moved forward into what was next.

I realize that we don't all take the same track. I understand that we don't even all have the same level of opportunity, and I am grateful for the opportunities that God has given me. So when I talk about high school graduation and level, I realize that there are people where that opportunity came with much more difficulty. And there are those who don't have that opportunity. **I think one of the lessons in life is to realize the value of opportunity.**

I bragged about my son Joshua last week, who is here with us for a little visit. He is someone who has been very faithful with the opportunities that God has given him. He has been an inspiration to me. He has taught me about the value of opportunity and faithfulness in that. I recommend that

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you just spend time with him and you'll see that. He has loads of time. Just go see him. But he owes me some money, so pay him for the time. Sorry.

I don't often recommend movies, but *The Help* does a great job of portraying very powerfully and in historic fashion the value of opportunity. You see people fighting for basic privileges and opportunities – those that we would consider basic rights. I'm giving you this disqualifier. I understand that we are all on different paths. But I think that this message has value, not just for those that are graduating or progressing into a new season, but for all of us, particularly because these truths are taken right from this chapter, from this passage of Scripture.

So, I'm going to give you three truths for the road. The first one is this:

### I. Life is a journey.

The goal of high school is to finish, right? And if you for some reason don't finish, to get your GED, or to transition in some way that helps you move on to what is next. There is a challenge here, and this is a challenge that we face all of our lives, because it holds out the promise of a destination. I am going to accomplish this goal, and that's the destination that I desire. But the problem is, the presentation of that, or the promise of that destination brings some false assumptions with it.

**It makes us think that life is about the destination and we miss the truth that life is just a journey. It's just one destination after another, and we don't arrive at the ultimate destination in this life.**

That is a very important truth, because one of the main ideas of this passage is that if you are a follower of Jesus, do you know what your destination is? **You are a citizen of heaven, and what you are really after is heaven.** In verse 20, Paul writes these words: "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

When you put that all together with what Paul has taught here in Philippians 3, he says, "Listen, everything for me is about knowing Jesus Christ. There is nothing that can compare with the glory and the excellence and the beauty of knowing him. There is no pleasure, there is no treasure -- nothing can compare. I count everything as a loss. And anything that would be a substitute for that I count as trash. **It's all about knowing him.** I will ultimately fully face-to-face know him when this life is over. **So in this life my pursuit is Jesus, and I can't wait until this life is over, because then I will see him face to face and know him fully as I am known, as he knows me.**

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If this truth gets in us, it's such a blessing. It is such a blessing because it helps us understand that what we really long for can never be fully experienced in this life alone. We long for eternity. We long for heaven. We long for an unhindered relationship with God.

We are actually starting with verses 12 through 16, because this truth is taught here in these verses, that life is a journey. What does Paul say? He gives us really two explanations of this idea. He tells us:

- #1: I have not arrived, and
- #2: I press on.

Think for a moment that this is the Apostle Paul. This is the man who wrote much of our New Testament. This is a man who had open visions of heaven and personal encounters with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. He is an Apostle, capital A. He is a spiritual heavyweight. He has been talking to us about his deep desire to know Jesus and he wants to make something clear. He wants to say, "Listen, I have not arrived. I am not yet perfect. I am not yet complete. I am not yet fully mature. I have not yet arrived on my spiritual journey. I am still journeying. In fact, I press on. And I pursue. I am pushing forward."

**That's really what we want to grab ahold of – this whole idea that life is a journey, not a destination, until we arrive at our final destination.** It helps us because we have this thinking, this intermittent destination thinking. How's that? I am coining a new term: "intermittent destination thinking."

This is how this works. I have this destination as my goal. It may be graduation from high school. It may be marriage. It may be having children. It may be the children moving out. It may be retirement. But we are anticipating and looking forward to something. It's probably a good thing. It's probably right for us to make this progression. But here's what happens. For some reason, it gets loaded up so much with anticipation and our longing for it, that it comes to represent more than it can ever fulfill.

We carry this baggage with it. We think, "When I graduate from high school, or when I graduate from college, or when I get started in my career or relationships, or whatever they are, then I'm going to be further along than I will be. I won't have some of the same struggles. Some of the temptations and challenges that that are so difficult for me right now -- well it will just be different. Then we can

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easily be dismayed when we get to that intermittent destination and find out: I'm still here, and I'm still struggling through some of this. I'm still fighting the fight. **Understanding that life is about this journey is very liberating for us.**

There are great things about high school. There are also some not so great things. There are great things about college. If you've had that opportunity or you are going to enjoy that opportunity, there are some things that are not great. Scripture would call us to the place where the great things about learning and growing intellectually and healthy social interaction and loyal friendships and new discoveries – all of that is going to be ultimately and perfectly fulfilled in heaven in a way that we can't even imagine. So marvelous. And all the bad things – the rejection, the junk, the failures, our failures, things that don't go well – those things will not be in heaven. **All of it together is to provoke and stir within us a longing for more of Christ and to know him and that which is ultimate.** For high school, you can substitute human relationships, or all the kinds of things that we know and enjoy in this life. They are to point us to that which is ultimate.

So Paul says, "I have not arrived. I press on." Then he tells us a little bit about how to press on. He says that he personally does it in two ways. **"Forgetting** what lies behind and **straining** toward..." The straining idea is a runner coming to the tape, coming to the finish line, and lunging forward. Paul is giving this picture that he is living his entire life like it's the last two yards of a race. It's a powerful image. He says, "In order to do that, I have to forget what lies behind."

He doesn't mean that he literally can't remember it; he has just rehearsed his own biography for us. His autobiography is in the first part of the chapter. He knows where he has been. He has learned from it. He can represent it. He can recount it to you. But he's not living there. He's not carrying that baggage. Something has happened to him where he is able to put all of that behind him and live in the moment.

Maybe I should have used the imagery of swimming today. Right? You are in that last part of the lap, or you are at the end of the race, completely exhausted, but you see the finish line and you are just breaking toward the tape. There is this focus. All energy is located in this moment, straining toward what he says is "the upward calling."

I think what he means by that is in one sense heaven, but in the fuller context of the passage, it's Christ. It is: "I want to know Christ right now. I want to live for him. I want to experience him. I have

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put everything behind me toward that one goal. That's what I'm pursuing, I'm lunging at right now in this moment. I can't wait till heaven because then it will be complete and it will be face to face.

So, how do you do that? How do you forget what lies behind? How do you press on? That takes us to the second truth for the road, and that is:

### II. **Unload your burden.**

Pilgrim's Progress was written by John Bunyan in 1678, so this book is roughly 350 years old. When we look at Puritan leaders, Puritan theology, we think of the years 1575 until 1700, a 125 year period. They bring us a very rich spirituality, very much a Jesus-centered, gospel-centered practical expression of faith. Bunyan wrote this while he was in prison. He was put in the Bedford town jail in Britain for 12 years. He was imprisoned because he was preaching the gospel. In prison, he made shoelaces to support his family, and he wrote. He wrote this book.

Now, this book has been published in over 200 languages. Since it was first published in 1678, it has never been out of print. There is reason to believe it's the most published, most read book after the Bible in English publishing and reading. It is an allegory, but part of its claim to fame is that some people say it's the first English novel, but at the very least it is foundational to the development of the English novel.

In it, Bunyan begins by saying, "I had a dream, and in the dream I saw a man." He talks about Christian and this book really illustrates the truths of this message. It's the journey of a man's life. He is searching for God. He is searching for eternal life. He is searching to know God. He has this burden on his back and he tries to get the burden off by keeping the law, by doing what's right. He can never unload that burden until he comes to the cross. And there at the cross, the burden falls off his back, it rolls down the hill and into an empty tomb. And that's only about 20 or 25 pages into the book. Then the rest of the book is his journey in this life toward his ultimate destination, and his battle with despair and discouragement and temptation.

Certain expressions that are famous to us like "Vanity Fair" are original to this book. They are found here and made famous and popular by the reference here.

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He comes across these characters throughout the book, and one character is called Talkative. The names give expression to certain character qualities. When I read this book for the first time, it was so liberating and freeing for me because of these first two truths.

The first one is: Okay, I haven't arrived. Life is a journey. I'm tempted to be discouraged because I'm not further than I am, because I still have this struggle, or that struggle, or this stronghold, whatever it may be. But I see now that if the Bible is properly understood, all of life is a fight, all of life is a pursuit in faith. Sometimes it comes from without, sometimes it comes from within. Sometimes we see it coming. Sometimes we avoid it. Sometimes we fall into it and we learn that way. But we are carried along by the Spirit of God and by Jesus.

Now, understanding that, you don't want to take this journey with a burden. You don't want heavy weight on your back. And the only way to forget what lies behind and to press on to what is before you is to unload your burden.

Paul actually talks about this in the first 11 verses. He says, "Listen, there are some false teachers. They come along and tell us that if you're going to follow Jesus, that's not enough. Jesus is not enough. You have to earn your righteousness. You have to earn your relationship. You have to be good. In their case, they were saying you have to specifically be "Jewish good." You have to be circumcised, you have to keep the law, you have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. And Paul, in strong language warns us. In verse 3 he says, "Listen, we are the true circumcision." The context for that is this false teaching. He says, "We are the true children of God."

He describes it in this way. In fact, verse 3 is one of the places in the Bible where you get a concise, unique definition of what it means to be a Christian. Here, it's in response to this false teaching, but it is this. Verse 3: "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh."

True Christians are people where the Spirit of God has come in and made them new. They put no confidence in their human righteousness, their personal achievements, their personal accomplishments, their flesh. But all of their boasting, all of their hope, all of their faith is in Jesus Christ and him alone and the work of his Spirit that is just his mercy and his grace.

A Christian is really not someone who has achieved something, not someone who has done something, but someone who has been done to. The Spirit of God has come in and given me new life. I've trusted in Jesus Christ. All of my hope is in Jesus.

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So Paul says, “Listen! Maybe you think I’m saying this because I was an underachiever? Well, I have news for you! I was a better achiever than all of you guys! I was better at being Jewish than you.” This really is his claim. He says, “Man, I was a Pharisee. I was blameless in keeping the law. I was zealous. I even persecuted the Church. If human achievement could get you right with God and get you fulfillment and everything that you long for, I would have been there.”

This is interesting because sometimes you long for something and you put all your hope in it. You put all your hope in great wealth or all your hope in some earthly thing that may be good. It’s not a bad thing. And if you never achieve it, it’s always out there in front of you. You have this thought that, “Well, one day I’ll get there and that success – whatever that is – I’ll really have life.” Sometimes the curse is never getting there, because you get there and you realize it doesn’t deliver.

You know, Aaron Rodgers, one of many, many famous individuals who reached the pinnacle of their career -- when he got on the team bus after winning the Super Bowl he immediately said to himself, “Is this all there is?” It’s an echo of what we hear from the Apostle Paul here.

So, lay down the burden of your own righteousness and take up the righteousness of Christ that is yours by faith. We can live our whole lives in regret over past failures, delays, disappointments, or we can leave all of that with Christ and say, “Lord, I’m pursuing you.”

You know, when we celebrated Joshua’s graduation, one of our family members was there. She is an amazing woman – very generous, very accomplished. She was laughing because she went to the same school that Joshua went to. She was saying that her GPA was lower than they were thinking because she has just done so well. In complete security, not giving a thought to it, she was just saying, “No, no, no. Actually, my grade point was not anything to brag about.”

The beauty of that was that she, as a grown woman, was not trying to gain some kind of acceptance by something that happened years and years ago. She realized that in Christ she had a life where she was able to bless others and that whatever was there in her past, she was grateful for, but it wasn’t the measure of who she is. When you experience Christ in this way, it’s so liberating!

You know, Mom, you’re in the grocery store and your little guy decides to be a holy terror. He somehow intuitively knows you’re in a weak moment. You can’t really control him. He is just going to make you pay, right? All these thoughts go through your mind, Dad, Mom, right? “I can bribe him. I can threaten him.” But something happens in us where we eventually learn, “Okay, this moment is not the measure of who I am,” and it frees me to be a better parent. It frees me to live with the

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moment and not overreact and not try to be something I'm not, not try to prove something. All of that leads to better parenting in the end, right? All of it is found in this root of: "What kind of burden are you carrying? Can you lay down your burden and give it to the Lord? Because in him alone is our righteousness found.

Then at the end of the chapter, Paul tells us our citizenship is in heaven, and he tells us to live a certain way. He actually tells us to walk this way. That's the third point and how I want to phrase it.

### III. Walk this way.

**So, life is a journey. Don't go on this journey with a burden, but give it to the Lord. Trust in him. Receive forgiveness. Receive the promise of eternal life. Live by his power. Live by his strength. But you are going to have obstacles and difficulties, and Paul says: "Imitate me." What he tells us throughout the chapter, and it comes to a culminating point here in this last paragraph is: It's the way of the cross. It's the way where we follow the example of Jesus.**

He says, "Don't get me wrong. There are people who are enemies of the cross. Their god is their belly. They live enslaved to their appetites. They glory in things that they ought to be ashamed of." He says, "Please don't misunderstand me. I'm telling you I haven't arrived. I'm telling you that you don't earn or achieve this standing with God. But don't think it doesn't matter how you live, because you have a goal! You want to know Christ."

I would say, if you want a summarizing statement for the path that he wants us to live on, the way that he is calling us to walk, it is the way of the cross. It is less of me and more of Jesus. **The more empty I become of me and the more full I become of Jesus, the more my walk is going to be a walk that takes me closer and closer to that ultimate destination of knowing Jesus and experiencing him.**

Paul is absolutely convinced that he knows a joy that you cannot know in any other way. In fact, he describes his joy in this way. He says, "Listen, my joy is knowing Jesus – knowing him deeper and more fully, and then helping others to know him, making him known. And all of the great things, even the really good gifts from God – they are enriched because they help me do that. Those things alone, without Jesus, just will not fulfill me, as thankful as I am for those things. So ultimately I am pressing into this call of what God has for me."

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So, Christians, we are on a journey. For those of you that say, “Well, I’m not sure where I’m at,” I would tell you: **Seek Jesus Christ. Trust in Jesus. Lay down your burden. Receive the gift of forgiveness, the gift of eternal life that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. He has a new life for you and invites you to that life.**

Let’s pray.