

Onward Christian Runners, Forgetting What's Before (Phil 3:11-14)

As you look back at this past year has there been one thing in particular you remember above all, positive or negative, one thought that dominates your thinking? Is there one memory, regret, fear, or hope that keeps coming up in your mind over and over? If you look ahead to next week or this New Year, does one thing stand out in your mind more than anything else? If you could have just one thing different in 2018, one thing changed, what would it be?

Paul Tripp: 'What's the "one thing" that your heart craves? What's the "one thing" that you think would change your life? What's the "one thing" that you look to for satisfaction, contentment, or peace? What's the "one thing" that you mourn that you've had to live without? What's the "one thing" that fills your day-dreams and commands your sleepy meditations? What's your one thing...exercis[ing] inescapable influence over your words, choices, and actions. Your "one thing" will become the one thing that shapes and directs your responses to the situations and relationships of your daily life...Here's what you say to yourself when something is your "one thing," "Life only has meaning and I only have worth if I have _____ in my life." The problem is that the "one thing" catalog is virtually endless:... *Approval*: If I'm loved and respected by_____. *Comfort* [in general or a healed body, health]... *Image*... *Control*: If I'm able to have mastery over this area of my life... *Helping*: If people are dependent on me and need me... *Dependence*: If someone is there to keep me safe... *Independence*: If I'm completely free of the obligation or responsibility to take care of someone... *Work*: If I'm highly productive and get a lot done... *Achievement*... *Family*: If my children/parents are happy/happy with me... What's your "one thing?"'¹

In Ps 27:4 David tells us what the one thing was that controlled his heart, his one thing he desired and sought and looked to above all as his all in all: '*One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD...*' (KJV). He wanted to be in the house of the Lord to behold the beauty of the Lord. That's another way to say His splendor, His glory, the beauty of holiness. I've talked to some of our homebound older saints and the one thing some say they miss most is to be in God's house again to be a part of the worship of our beautiful Savior. Do you desire and seek to be in His house to know Him more and be more changed into His image? Is that your # 1 thing? Is it top 5? Is it on your list? What's your one thing? As we sang earlier, are you fixing your eyes on Christ as your soul's reward?

David's son Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, said in Ecclesiastes: *'It is good that you grasp one thing...'* (7:18 NAS). A blind man healed by the greater Son of David said *'One thing I know...I was blind, now I see'* (Jn 9:25 NKJV). And this Lord Jesus wanted His followers to see what He said to someone distracted with other things, preparations and service, and disturbed with others not doing the one thing she thought should be done: *"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better..."* (Lk 10:41-42 NIV). The one thing Mary was doing was sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to Him and learning more of the Lord she loved. She was drawn to the beauty of the Lord and she wanted to dwell there, to stay there, seek after Him, to behold more of Him. Mary's one thing was what's needed

In other translations Martha was *'anxious and troubled'* or *'bothered about so many things, but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part'* or *'the best part'* (ESV, NAS, NET). Or *'all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it'* (NET). Paul in Phil 3 also discovered the one thing he needed by grace after doing so many things religiously he thought were necessary to be saved. He could say 'one thing I know, I was blind, now I see' by amazing grace. And with David: *'one thing I desire, to see more of His beauty, to know Him more...'*

It's possible to be busy in ministry or doing many things for the Lord and miss what He's doing for us or saying to us. It's possible for our worries and anxieties and troubles to become our one thing. We can be self-righteously bothered by what others *aren't* doing that we think they should be, but we aren't doing what the Lord says we should be. You can be the detail police, upset or concerned about many things, and miss the one thing necessary, the one thing that matters most, the better, the best part. Our closing song says 'knowing You, there is no greater thing, You're all my all, You're the best'²

Thou my best thought by day or by night, waking or sleeping Thy presence my light
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart, High King of heaven my treasure Thou art³

Paul in Phil 3 discovered the one thing he needed above all, he calls it in v. 7 *'the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...'* He says it again in v. 10: *'that I may know him...'* Today in our study through Philippians we come to v. 13, look at the middle of v. 13: *'...But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'*

A religious ruler once thought he had kept God's law perfectly from his youth, but Jesus looked at him with love and told him '*one thing you lack.*' Then Jesus challenged the young man to give up all he had, to lose it all to gain treasure in heaven and follow after Jesus (Mk 10:21). That man went away sad, but Paul as a religious ruler found joy when the Lord opened his eyes to see his religiosity and law-keeping he once prized were a loss in v. 4-7. He gladly gave up everything and counted it as trash compared to the treasure of knowing Jesus in v. 8, the one thing he prized above all in v. 14.

John Piper sums up the context of Phil 3: Paul is talking about 'how central the *value* of Christ is...He speaks of rejoicing in Christ [v. 1], and glorying in Christ [v. 3], and...gaining Christ, and being found in Christ [v. 9], and making Christ his own [v. 12], and...prizing Christ...more precious than performance...achievements...being with Jesus...will be worth any price of suffering...the final prize [he says is] Jesus himself...everlasting enjoyment of the fellowship of Christ...That's what it means to treasure Christ...'⁴

We could sum up Paul's one thing as pursuing Jesus onward and upward. Pursuing Him onward and upward, forgetting and striving for Christ's sake. And v. 15 makes clear this is also how we must think to be mature in Christ. How do we think like this to make this one thing our own? It starts in v. 12

1. **Feel your need to press on (v. 12)**

¹² *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.* ¹³ *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.*

On New Year's Eve we looked at Paul's resolution in v. 10 to know Jesus more and be like Him more by the gospel power of His resurrection. Paul said it this way in 1 Cor 2:2 '*I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*' Paul says to the Corinthians he wanted their faith to rest not in himself but in God's power, the same here. Paul felt his need to press on and his need for the power of the risen Christ.

Paul doesn't say 'let go and let God' – this is 'lay hold of God in Christ and never let go of this pursuit.' Phil 2:12-13 '*work out...for it is God who is at work in you...*' Col. 1:29 '*I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me...*' God worked in him as Paul also worked hard to the point of exhaustion. Paul talks about the Christian life as a 'fight of faith' and a daily warfare. It's a journey and Phil 3:12 says he hadn't arrived yet.

Parents know the question 'are we there yet?' You're on a journey to So Cal and in south Sac kids ask 'are we there yet?' I wonder if little Saul of Tarsus asked his parents when they made pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Passover, if his dad said 'no, son, we've still got 200 more miles to go on foot?' Well, as an adult he wants his family of faith to know he's not there yet, and he still has a long way to go and so do we. He's not already or even almost arrived.

¹² *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect...* What's the 'this' he hadn't already attained? ¹¹ *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* ¹² *Not that I have already obtained this ...*

Paul knew he wouldn't be perfect until the day he was raised with a perfect glorified body. Paul knew he wouldn't obtain perfection until he obtained resurrection. He knew he wouldn't arrive spiritually till he arrived in glory.

This isn't the usual general *resurrection* word in v. 10, it has a Greek prefix *ex=*out from the rest of the dead. It suggests a resurrection separate from the general resurrection and before the rest of the dead are raised, some raised out from the rest? Paul knew '*the dead in Christ rise first*' (1 Thess 4:16). Heb 11:35 has believers seeking to '*obtain a better resurrection*' (NASB). John said '*Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection!*' '*The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended...they were judged ...thrown into the lake of fire*' (Rev 20:4, 13-14). So believers rise first for glory, unbelievers rise to judgment separately later

People of other views only see 1 general resurrection at the very end for all, or end times novels assume 3 resurrections, the first one 7 years before what Rev 20 calls '*the first resurrection.*' In my view, 2 resurrections are clear in the NT, but what's clear to all is Jesus comes for judgment, resurrection(s?). What isn't clear to all are *details* before and after Jesus comes again, but it will be clear to all of us after He comes, we can look forward to that! Paul looked forward to whatever means God would use to make him part of that day. If there's uncertainty in v. 11, it may be whether here or there or in the air, or Paul being unsure if he'd die as a martyr or die by some other means?

But don't miss what's clear and what was clearly Paul's ambition till then in v. 11: he felt his need to press on as he wasn't perfect and hadn't yet arrived. To him to live was Christ and to die gain (1:21, with Him in perfect glory). Derek Thomas explains the doctrine of Christian perfectionism 'was popular in the late 19th century' and 'Spurgeon in a train station in London...met one of these people...this person came up to Spurgeon and said in the course of

conversation that he had reached perfection...had received some enduement of the Holy Spirit that moved him and he had reached this state of [sinless] perfection. So [Spurgeon] trod on this person's toe and something emerged [from the perfectionists mouth] that proved [he] wasn't quite yet perfect.¹⁵

No man should ever dare to claim to be a better Christian than the apostle Paul, and if after 30 years he knew he hadn't arrived and was imperfect and chief of sinners still and in need to press on, we have that same need, amen? Never think there's no more progress to be made. If you do make progress in some way by grace, God wants you to help others progress in the faith. If you look back at 1:25 Paul knew as long as he was still alive there was still progress to be made with others: 1:25 *'Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith...'* As Paul neared the end of his life, he pressed on to make more progress and he knew God kept him alive to help others make more progress in the faith, for their joy. Senior saints here, press on. We need you to continue with us, for our progress, for our joy as we see you press on and help us to press on. We're never to retire or relax spiritually, press on praying and encouraging.

Young person, don't rest in the Bible verses you know or the faith of your parents, press on as Phil 3:12 says to make it your own. The motive in 3:12: *...I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* KJV says: *I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.* Paul's past career in Jewish law enforcement was apprehending Christians until Christ apprehended him on the Damascus Road. Jesus arrested Paul, Jesus now arrests his attention as he follows Him. That verb in other places is translated seized, caught, overtake. Paul wasn't just taught, he was caught by Christ and he wanted to catch more of Christ. He wanted to grasp Jesus who grabbed hold of him. Your Bible may say he pressed on to lay hold of that for which he was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. As Paul ran his hell-bound race God saved and placed him in a race of faith. Till the race is finished and work is done, press on by faith and not by sight.

Feel your need to press on, that's #1, now **#2. Forget your past as you run**
¹³ *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...*

The idea of forgetting in v. 13 isn't at will amnesia or absent-mindedness, it's not turning back to what's behind, it's leaving the past behind you and not looking back because you're looking forward to what's ahead of you.

Jesus said *‘let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife.’* And *‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’* (Lk 17:31-32, 9:62). But Phil 3 is specific to running.

v. 7-8 uses the language of accountants, v. 13 is the language of athletics. It seems Paul was a sports fan, as he compares the Christian life to sports like boxing, wrestling, competing in the Olympic games, and athletes not being disqualified. His favorite event must have been track and field, as he talks about ‘the man who runs’ and the Christian life as ‘finishing the course’ or ministry like a relay race passing on a baton. In Galatians he writes of the gospel he wanted to relay to them, I *‘fear that I was running or had run my race in vain...You were running a good race. Who cut in on you ...?’* (2:2, 5:7 NIV). In 1 Cor 9 he writes *‘in a race all the runners run...Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training...I do not run like a man running aimlessly...’* (v. 24-27 NIV).

In Phil 3:13 Paul says I don’t run like a man looking back over one shoulder at what’s behind me where someone might cut me off on the other. I don’t run in vain or without aim, I’m running looking ahead and straining forward

*The cross before me, the world behind me, no turning back.*⁶

In the 1950s Roger Bannister of England went into strict training, his aim to be the first to run a mile in under 4 minutes. For 9 years no one could till he did it in 3:59. 46 days later Australian runner John Landy ran a mile in 3:58. Weeks later they ran head to head, the last lap was neck and neck, literally. ‘Then came the famous moment ... as at the last stride before the home stretch the crowds roared. Landy could not hear Bannister’s footfall and thus compulsively looked back [over his left shoulder while Landy passed on the right]—a fatal lapse of concentration. Bannister launched his attack and Landy did not see him until he lost the lead’⁷ (and race by 0.8 seconds).

A larger-than-life bronze sculpture of the famous moment was created, and Landy quipped ‘While Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, I am probably the only one ever turned into bronze for looking back.’ That’s a physical example but the spiritual exhortation is don’t look back at others (or what they did to you in the past or your past failings). Some seem frozen in time. They turned back off course into wet cement. They just can’t seem to move forward because they’re looking backward, living in the past. Instead of forgetting what lies behind, they’re focusing on it, and bringing it back up and keeping it in front of their vision. Instead of straining forward, they’re stuck in reverse, or neutral at best, spinning their wheels in the mud.

Biblical counselor Steve Viars writes: ‘You do not have to wallow around in the sins of your past...To get beyond this habit, you must discover what is occurring in your heart that makes it so easy for you to get caught up in this behavior...men and women become stuck in their past re-playing their sin over and over in their minds...constantly rehearse past sins...repeatedly beat themselves up over past sins even after they’ve asked...forgiveness. It’s almost as if they feel they must do some sort of penance...[but he points out Paul was a murderer of Christians and blasphemy was part of his past sins] but he did not continue to wallow in them. Instead he rejoiced in God's grace (1 Timothy 1:12-17) and pressed forward to accomplish what God had planned for him today and in the future (Philippians 3:12-14).’⁸

The 2nd half of v. 13 explains the 1st: forgetting involves straining forward. Paul's forgetting wasn't erasing everything behind from his mind (he listed out in detail his past in v. 4-6), but he saw all he had done as rubbish, dung to be left behind and not to go back and pick up or show to others. It wasn't a mental clean slate, it was a moving on from the unclean slate of past sin left at the cross. Not passive amnesia or absent-mindedness, an active mind renewal, as Paul says in Eph 4 '*be renewed in the spirit of your minds... do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.*' In other words, keep current, deal with it in your spirit that day, then move on. Eph 4 goes on to say that includes putting off bitterness or thinking evil, and putting on words that are needed, edifying, and gracious, and be kind, tender-hearted, forgiving those who hurt you in the past by gospel thinking.

God says in Isa 43:18: *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.*
 Gen 41:51: *Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, 'It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household'* (NIV). He still remembered the evil but focused on God-intended good in it, 50:20. God's grace can make us forget in the sense of not resent, not dwell on what is behind, because we're dwelling on a good and sovereign God's purpose in front of us, even if we can't see it all yet (as Joseph couldn't yet in Gen 41). It's possible to 'willfully forget' (2 Pet 3:5 NKJV, ESV 'deliberately overlook')

I can't control what thoughts pop into our head but I'm responsible for what I do with those thoughts, what I choose to focus on or dwell on (Phil 4:8). We need guarded minds (4:7b) and to take thoughts captive to obey Christ. If you're soldiers advancing in the jungle and a rogue enemy pops up, you don't surrender and let him take you wherever he wants, take him captive and he needs to come under your captain and you need to keep advancing.

On your computer screen you may get pop-ups you can't control at times, but you can choose to close windows and not follow links deep into the web

MacArthur: 'Paul made a break with everything in his past, both good and bad. Religious achievements, virtuous deeds, great successes in ministry, as well as sins, missed opportunities, and disasters must all be forgotten. They do not control the present or the future. Believers cannot live on past victories, nor should they be debilitated by the guilt of past sins. Churches are full of spiritual cripples, paralyzed by the grudges, bitterness, sins, and tragedies of the past. Others try to survive in the present by reliving past successes. They must break with that past if they are to pursue the spiritual prize. God is interested in what believers do now and in the future...clearest vision belongs to those who forget the past.'⁹ Be Thou our vision, O Lord!

Feel your need, forget your past, focus on your Lord onward and upward

Look at end of v. 13: '*...straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*'

If I could write a new line to an old hymn: 'Onward Christian runners,
Don't look back to before, Fix your eyes on Jesus, follow Him as Lord,
Onward Christian runners, striving for the prize
Upward is our focus, looking unto Christ'

Heb 12 '*let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross...*' (NAS). Fix your eyes on Him your soul's reward till the race is finished and His work is done, perfecting your faith.

Stop looking back and look forward to Jesus. Consider Him who endured as He looked to the joy ahead of Him past the cross. Don't look down at your cell phone as you run, don't look at yourself as you run, don't look at sin of others running behind you, don't look at the record of wrongs you've been keeping as you run, look up to Jesus at the right hand of the throne. Look to His outstretched arms. When you're tempted to look back, look all the way back to the cross where He was punished for sin, past, present and future, so you don't need to keep punishing for what happened in the past. If you can't seem to forget some things in your head, say '*bless the Lord O my soul, and forget none of His benefits*' like Ps 103 and rehearse those. Don't listen to self, preach the gospel to yourself. Don't look at self, look up at your Savior

Don't be paralyzed by guilt or regret. It's been said if Satan reminds you of your past, remind Satan about his future. He's already lost, he's a defeated foe, we have victory in Jesus, so press on knowing God who started you on this race will be with you to the finish (Phil 1:6). Persevere and finish well.

Run the straight race thro' God's good grace, Lift up thine eyes, and seek His face;
 Life with its way before us lies, Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.¹⁰
 May I run the race before me, Strong and brave to face the foe,
 Looking only unto Jesus As I onward go.¹¹

Fix your eyes on Jesus who is the prize and the goal, and He's also cheering you on as He's called you upward. Press on to know Him more and to finish the race where the victor's crown awaits upward. Onward Christian runners.

¹ <https://www.christianity.com/blogs/paul-tripp/psalm-27-what-is-your-one-thing.html>

² "Knowing You," Graham Kendrick.

³ "Be Thou My Vision."

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/treasuring-christ-together-because-he-is-more-valuable-than-all-else>

⁵ Derek Thomas, "Pressing On and Up," www.sermonaudio.com

⁶ "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."

⁷ Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 162.

⁸ Steve Viars, *Putting Your Past in Its Place* (Harvest House, 2011), p. 185-89.

⁹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, p. 247.

¹⁰ "Fight the Good Fight."

¹¹ "May the Mind of Christ My Savior."