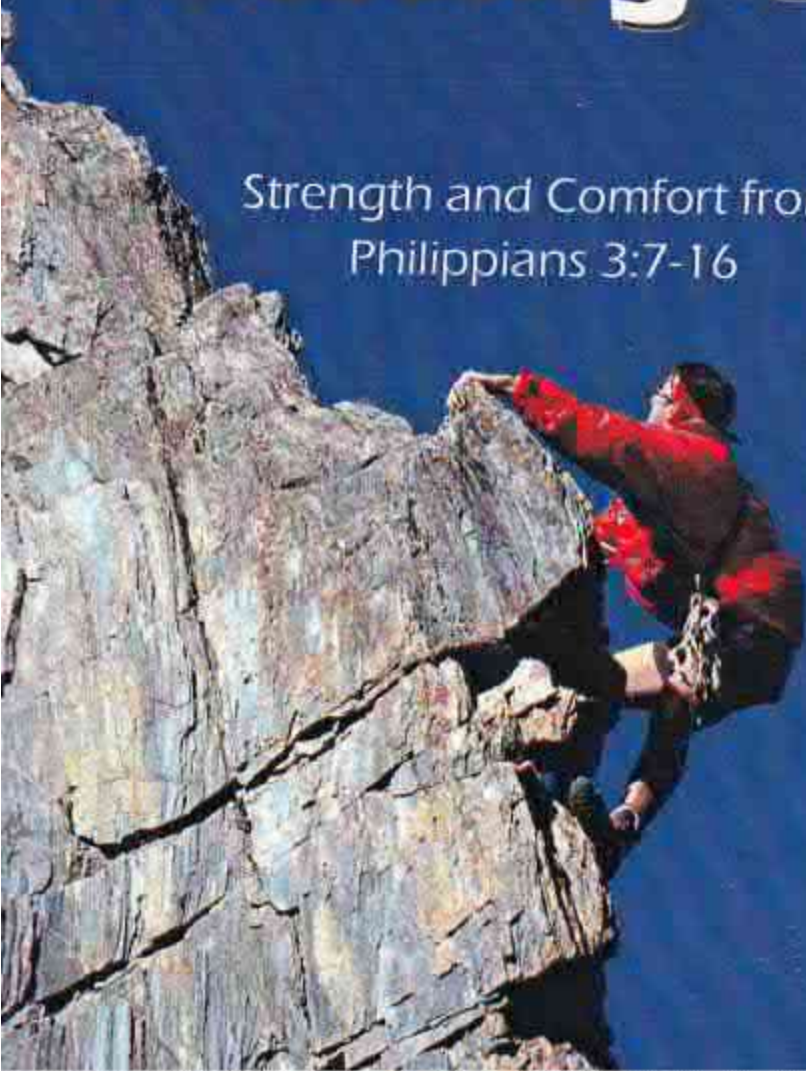


F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

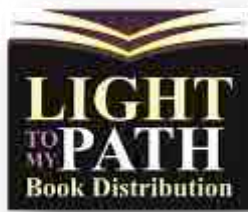
Pressing On

Strength and Comfort from
Philippians 3:7-16



Pressing On

Strength and Comfort from
Philippians 3:7-16



F. Wayne Mac Leod

Light To My Path Book Distribution
Sydney Mines, NS CANADA

Pressing On

Copyright © 2012 by F. Wayne Mac Leod

Revised August 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise specified are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used with permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. All rights reserved.)

A Special thanks to the proof readers:

Diane Mac Leod, Pat Schmidt

Table of Contents

Preface	1
1 The Reality of Suffering and Trials	3
2 Priorities	9
3 Found in Him	18
4 Resurrection Power	24
5 The Fellowship of His Suffering	30
6 Becoming Like Him in His Death.....	38
7 Not That I Have Already Attained.....	45
8 Taking Hold	52
9 Forgetting what is Behind	59
10 Straining Toward What is Ahead.....	68
11 Winning the Prize.....	78
12 The Mature View.....	86
13 Living Up to What I Have Attained	94

PREFACE

I was initiated into full-time Christian ministry on the Island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. The church to which we had been called had been a dynamic and growing church. When we arrived, however, it was struggling with division, misunderstanding and anger. In the course of my Christian service, I have seen many believers struggle with deep wounds and hurts.

Christians are not immune to problems. From the beginning of time our enemy has been seeking to devour, discourage and defeat those who love the Lord Jesus. The Old Testament book of Job is devoted to the problem of suffering in the life of the believer. In the book of Psalms, David and others speak honestly about their feelings in the midst of life's trials.

This is a study of Philippians 3:7-16. It is not my intention to be exhaustive in my exposition of the passage. I have written enough Bible studies and commentaries to know that we can never exhaust the application of Scripture to our lives. It is not my purpose to discuss why believers face trials, testing and opposition. I take this as a given fact of life in a sinful world. Philippians 3:7-16, however, has a powerful application for all who are facing difficult times. I pray that the application of Paul's teaching in this passage

will be as much of a blessing to the reader as it has been to me. May this simple exposition of Paul's teaching be a source of instruction, encouragement and support to God's people around the world, giving strength to press on in the difficult times of life.

F. Wayne MacLeod

1

THE REALITY OF SUFFERING AND TRIALS

Since the moment sin entered the world, creation has been deteriorating, affected by its curse. Satan, as our great enemy, is seeking to destroy the good work God is doing by influencing people and nations to sin and evil. He has done tremendous damage to this already sick and dying world. Every human, apart from the Lord Jesus, has been born with a sinful nature and struggles to walk in God's ways. Natural disasters strike everywhere. Earthquakes, cyclones and floods take thousands of lives each year. There are nations that have rarely known peace. On the streets of our cities, murder, rape and other crimes are much more common than we would like to admit. The abuse of alcohol and drugs has destroyed many families. Injustice and prejudice have ravaged entire countries, influencing policies and laws. We can't escape the reality of sin and its impact on our lives.

God's people have not been exempt from this devastation. Job lost his entire family to Satan's attack (Job 1:13-15). Influenced by the sin around them, David's children fell into the sins of murder, incest and rebellion. Jacob's daughter

Dinah was raped, and his sons, Simeon and Levi, slaughtered a whole town to get revenge (Genesis 34). Churches have been split by accusations and falsehoods stirred up by Satan. The focus of Satan's effort is the people of God. He will do all he can to defeat them and draw them away from their Lord.

Jesus taught that wickedness would increase on the earth and believers would be hated, persecuted and put to death as the day of His return drew near.

(9) "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. (10) At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, (11) and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. (12) Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold. Matthew 24:9-12 (NIV)

We are in the midst of an intense battle. As the Kingdom of God moves from one heart to another, Satan increases his efforts to resist what God is doing. Those who believe that Satan can't touch them because they belong to God are deceived. Satan has always done his best to oppress and hinder believers. He moved the political and religious leaders of Christ's day to falsely accuse, beat, and nail our Lord to a cross. His influence is clearly seen in the way he moved the religious leaders of the New Testament to persecute and kill the apostles. The apostle Peter warned the believers of his day to be on their guard against Satan and his attacks:

(8) Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (9) Resist him, standing firm in

the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. 1 Peter 5:8-9 (NIV)

Paul told the believers in Ephesus that their battle was not against flesh and blood humans but against spiritual forces in heavenly places.

(12) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (13) Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Ephesians 6:12-13 (NIV)

The apostle John reminded his readers, in the book of Revelation, that Satan will intensify his effort when he sees his time getting short.

(12) Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." Revelation 12:12 (NIV)

John also prophesied that in the last days a great beast from Satan would make war against the saints and conquer them.

(7) He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. Revelation 13:7 (NIV)

Many saints before us have suffered at the hands of Satan. The Old Testament saint Job was ravaged by Satan. Satan killed his children, stripped him of his possessions and left him on an ash heap crying out in intense pain. Satan's intent was to have Job curse God and die.

Imagine a soldier going into battle being surprised that the enemy actually shot to kill! It never ceases to amaze me that believers are surprised that Satan actually strikes them. His attacks are often vicious. While victory belongs to the Lord, Satan does his best to discourage, dishearten and deprive believers of their blessing in Christ. He will attempt to destroy our reputation through lies and exaggerations. He will strip us of our possessions, friends and loved ones. He will attack our children or our marriages. He will do all he can to hinder what God wants to do in our lives.

As believers we will feel the sting of Satan's arrows. They may come at us from bitter enemies who hate the cause for which we stand or they may come from those we love and respect. Judas, who betrayed the Lord Jesus and handed him over to be crucified, was one of the twelve disciples (see John 13:27). The apostle Paul makes it clear that if we want to live a godly life, we will suffer persecution:

(12) In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 2 Timothy 3:12 (NIV)

We should expect to suffer in this world. We should not be surprised at the attacks of the enemy. How are we to deal with the opposition and trials that come our way? What should be our attitude, our focus and commitment when we face these attacks?

While Philippians 3 is not exclusively about suffering in the Christian life, it does teach us some important truths about facing opposition and trials. In the remaining chapters we will examine what the apostle Paul has to teach us about dealing with the difficulties and attacks that come our way as we seek to live and walk with the Lord Jesus in a sinful world.

For Consideration:

- What does the Scripture teach us about the reality of suffering and trials for the believer? What are some examples of believers who suffered in the Bible?
- Why should we not be surprised that the enemy would want to hinder us in our walk and commitment to the Lord Jesus?
- Why do you suppose some believers seem to suffer more than others?

For Prayer:

Father God, I recognize today that you have called me to a life of godliness and holiness. This is a life that Satan hates. I see from this chapter that those who live godly lives will often suffer persecution. I recognize that I am in the midst of a spiritual battle and that Satan is seeking to oppose what You are doing in me. Today I make it my commitment to seek You and Your heart. I ask that you would strengthen me in the midst of opposition. Give me courage to face the enemy. Give me grace to resist without giving in. Teach me through the exposition of your Word in

this book how to live a victorious Christian life for Your glory.

2

PRIORITIES

(7) But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. (8) What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. Philippians 3:7-8 (NIV)

Much of the suffering and pain we experience in life is the result of losing the things we treasure most. We don't take the loss of our treasures lightly. The treasures I speak about here are not necessarily earthly wealth and possessions. These are not the only things we value in life. Who among us doesn't value our reputation or our ability to make a difference in this world? We all want to feel useful? We hold our ministries, families and friends in high esteem. We experience deep pain when these are stripped from us.

We agonize when God takes away our loved ones. We fight with God to hang on to the things we value most. We surrender them only with great difficulty. We wonder at the story of Abraham, who took up his knife to kill his son in

obedience to the command of God. In a materialistic world, priorities can often be misplaced. In a humanistic world, we value our strength and wisdom and fail to see our need of God. All too often the things we treasure stand between us and our God.

In Philippians 3:7-8 Paul tells us that he considered everything a loss for the sake of knowing Christ. What does this tell us about Paul's priorities? He chose to value Christ and his relationship with Him more than anything he could have or do. These are the words of a man who had been stripped of distractions in life. They are the words of one who valued Christ and his relationship with Him more than anything life could offer. Paul did not come to this point all at once. God worked powerfully in him to bring him to this place.

Acts 9 tells the story of how Paul was traveling to Damascus to persecute the followers of Christ. On his way, a great light from heaven shone around him. The voice of God spoke through that light. Paul fell to the ground, and for three days he was completely blind. He had to be led from place to place by his co-workers. That encounter changed Paul's life.

Have you ever wondered what it was like for Paul during those three days of total blindness? He had been confronted with the reality of the Lord Jesus and His divine nature. Paul had made it his life's ambition to observe the Old Testament Law as the only way of salvation. He was so committed to this that he actively sought to kill those who taught anything else. When Christ spoke to him in that light, Paul's whole belief system was challenged. He learned that everything he had believed about Jesus was

wrong. He came to understand that he had devoted himself passionately to a cause he could no longer support. God radically changed Paul's religious beliefs.

That day God also took away Paul's ministry and position in society. He would move now in a different direction. He had been a well-respected leader among the Pharisees. From that moment on, his reputation in that community would be destroyed. He was now a follower of Jesus. Paul lost his ministry and his community standing. He could never go back.

God also confronted Paul's actions as a persecutor of His people. Speaking about this Paul would write:

(9) I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. (10) And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. (11) Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. Acts 26:9-11 (NIV)

Paul had been a very intense persecutor of the followers of Jesus. We don't know how many Christians suffered at his hands or were put to death as a result of his violent campaign against them. What would it have been like for Paul to wake up to the reality that he was fighting against the God he so desired to serve? The thought of what he had done to so many Christians must have haunted Paul to his death. Writing to the Corinthians later in his ministry he would say:

(9) For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 1 Corinthians 15:9 (NIV)

Can you imagine how humbling it would have been for Paul to come to the horrible realization that he had been such an enemy to the God he tried so hard to serve? What would it have been like for him to show his face in the Christian community? What words could he share with those whose loved ones had died at his hands? How could he gain their respect as a servant of Jesus? Could he ever stand before them without feeling deep shame and disgrace? This terrible past haunted him to his grave. God stripped him of his pride.

Paul was a man of tremendous passion, zeal and energy. Those three days of blindness left him feeling useless. He couldn't go anywhere without someone holding his hand. For all he knew, his blindness was permanent. Would he ever be useful again? God stripped him of his sight and left him for those days a broken man wondering if this was his judgment for the terrible deeds he had done to God's people.

Even as a believer, God continued to break and humble Paul. As he went from community to community, he was beaten and persecuted. He was driven by force from the towns where he preached. At times the rejection of his preaching was so intense that his listeners stoned and left him for dead outside their village. The largest crowds Paul drew were more interested in stoning him than in listening to his message. God stripped Paul of pride and self-reliance through the things he suffered.

How easy it is, in the pain and sufferings of life, to focus on what is being taken from us and what we are suffering rather than on what God is doing in us. We get wrapped up in maintaining our ministries, protecting our reputation or defending our possessions. These things become the focus. We want to avoid anything that causes discomfort. Somehow we have been taught that the Christian should never experience pain. This is simply untrue. There can be no growth without pain. There will be sacrifices to make, crosses to bear and burdens to carry. The apostle Paul knew this better than most. He suffered more than any other apostle, but he also knew deep fellowship and intimacy with the Lord. God stripped Paul of all distractions and instead revealed things to him that no other person ever knew or saw. Listen to what Paul wrote about his experience in 2 Corinthians 12:2-7.

(2) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. (3) And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— (4) was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. (5) I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. (6) Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. (7) To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 2 Corinthians 12:2-7 (NIV)

The revelations Paul experienced were so powerful that God gave him a particular weakness or handicap in order to keep him from becoming proud. Through the things he suffered, he came to a place in his life where intimacy with Christ was possible. This became his highest goal and ambition. Everything else was insignificant compared to knowing Christ.

Until pride, love of possessions and pleasures are stripped from us, we will always fall short of God's purpose. God needs to strip us of ourselves, our goals, our religion and our ambitions in life. We have become so distracted by the worldly things we treasure that we can no longer hear God or experience intimacy with Him.

This is where Israel was in the days of Hosea the prophet. God's people had become so attracted to the things of this world that they turned their backs on the Lord God. They felt their lives were full and did not see their need of God. How this grieved God, who longed for fellowship and intimacy with His people. God was so grieved about this that He threatened to strip them of all He had given them as a nation, leaving them desperate. He would do this because He was jealous for the heart of His people. He would remove all distractions so that they would have nothing left but Him.

(2) "Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts. (3) Otherwise I will strip her naked and make her as bare as on the day she was born; I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst. (4) I will not show my love to her children, because they are the children of adultery. (5) Their mother

has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.' (6) Therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. (7) She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now.' Hosea 2:2-7 (NIV)

God would not share His people with anyone or anything. He would take away all distractions so that nothing would come between them.

There is a cost to pay for deeper intimacy with the Lord Jesus. Everything that stands between us and our Him must be removed. Paul had learned to treasure Christ more than anything. He willingly placed his religious efforts, his reputation, his possessions and his personal comfort on the altar to know Christ and walk in deeper fellowship with Him. Stripped of everything else, Christ alone became his passion and desire. Nothing else could compare to what he had in Him.

Hebrews 10 speaks about a people who willingly suffered insult and accepted the confiscation of their property because they were looking for a better and lasting possession in the presence of the Lord Jesus.

(32) Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. (33) Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. (34) You sympathized

with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. Hebrews 10:32-34 (NIV)

If we are going to face the struggles that come our way in this life, we must first get our priorities in line with the teaching of Paul in this passage. We must learn to hold lightly to the things we treasure in this world. This will not remove the pain. We will still feel the sting of false accusations and slander. We will still groan at the loss of our loved ones. His presence, however, will bring us comfort, satisfaction, and delight.

Have you been holding something too tightly? Will you lay it down today? Will you stop trying to protect what only keeps you from deeper intimacy with Christ? Will you trust what He is doing in you today? Will you surrender to Him and let Him do or take what He wants? Will you allow Him to redefine your priorities? He longs to draw you closer. Loosen your grip on the things that keep you from Him. Trust what He is doing. Surrender to His purpose. Give up the battle and let him draw near.

The first great lesson of this passage has to do with our life priorities. As long as we cling to what God wants to strip away, there can be no ultimate victory or satisfaction. Paul's attitude must become ours. We must be willing to part with everything we treasure to know Christ more intimately. Hold nothing so tightly that you could not sacrifice it to know and walk with Christ in deeper fellowship and intimacy.

For Consideration:

- How has God used trials in your life to reorganize your priorities?
- Should we expect that we can live the Christian life without pain and suffering? What do trials and suffering produce in us?
- Are there things you are holding too tightly? What are they? Have these things been keeping you from deeper intimacy with the Lord?
- What does Christ mean to you today? Are there things in life more important to you than Him? Is there anything you would not give up to know Him more intimately? What is it?

For Prayer:

Father, there are many things I treasure in this life. I confess that, at times, these things have taken priority in my life. I give you permission today to re-order my priorities. I give you permission to strip away from me anything that keeps me from the relationship You want to have with me. I ask that you would give me the priority Paul had for his life. Help me to delight in you. May knowing you be a greater ambition for my life. Take from me all that hinders my relationship with you. Let me hold nothing so tightly that I cannot let it go when you require it of me.

3

FOUND IN HIM

(9) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. Philippians 3:9 (NIV)

We saw in the last meditation that Paul held nothing so tightly that he could not give it up to know Christ. He valued Christ and knowing Him more than anything in life. If verses 7-8 speak about Paul's priority in life, verse 9 speaks about his position.

Paul begins the verse by telling the Philippians that his goal was to be found in Christ. There are two points we need to make here.

First, being “in Christ” is a picture of acceptance. Remember that Christ came to forgive our sins and open the door for us to enter the presence of the Father. When Paul said he was in Christ, he is telling us that he had access to God through Christ. Christ's work gave him a new standing with

the Father. He now stood in the presence of God Almighty, fully accepted and forgiven.

Second being “in Christ” is a picture of security. In his weakness, the apostle hid himself in Christ. In Him he was strong and safe. Nothing could defeat him because he was surrounded by Christ. Anyone who wanted to oppose him must first pass through Christ. There could be no greater security. Paul’s position was one of complete acceptance and security in Christ.

Paul goes on to speak about a righteousness that was not his own. Righteousness has to do with a right standing with God or being in a right relationship with Him. Paul knew he could not enjoy this right standing with God as a result of anything he had done or could do himself. He knew he could never be good enough to meet God’s standard. Paul put no value in the things he suffered or accomplished to give him favor or standing with God.

Notice that this right standing with God came through faith in Christ and His work. Paul could not measure up to God’s standard, but Christ could. Paul’s only hope was to surround himself with Christ and trust in His righteousness.

I live on the east coast of Canada on the Atlantic Ocean. We are about three kilometers from a ferry that takes passengers to the province of Newfoundland (a four hour trip across the ocean). Imagine that I decided to swim to Newfoundland. I would only get so far before sinking to the bottom of the ocean. I am simply not strong enough to face those waves and the distance is too far for me to swim. The only way I can get to Newfoundland is to get on the ferry. It will take me across safely. This is what Paul had learned. He had come to realize that he could not get to God on his own. His righteousness was insufficient to gain

access into God's presence. The only way he could get to God was through the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. Only by clinging to what Christ had done could he cross the gap that separated him from God. This is the righteousness he clung to. This is what he depended on to get him to God.

Notice also in this verse that not only is the righteousness Paul speaks about through Christ, but it comes from God by faith to us. The implication here is that the righteousness of the Lord Jesus becomes mine. We have every confidence now to stand boldly before God. We do not need to fear our unworthiness. Christ has taken care of our shame. He has covered our guilt. God no longer holds our sins against us. Christ has removed every barrier by giving us a perfect standing with God. Perfect communion with God is now possible. Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 103:

(11) For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; (12) as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (13) As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; Psalms 103:11-13 (NIV)

Because of Christ, nothing now stands between me and God. I have a perfect standing with God because of Christ and have every right and confidence to stand before God without shame and guilt.

As a child of God, I have a rich inheritance. Imagine a father leaving his son a large mansion but the son, because he feels so unworthy, refuses to move into and enjoy that mansion. He lives instead in an old run down hut. There

are many believers like this today. They accept the fact that the Lord Jesus has made them children of God. They believe that they have a rich inheritance as children of God, but they never tap into those resources. They put all that God has given them on a shelf and worship Him for the richness of His gifts but they never feel worthy enough to enjoy them. They do not live as sons and daughters of God. They live like unworthy sinners when Christ has removed all sin and shame.

As I face the trials and pains of this life I can do so with tremendous confidence. I am "in Christ." I am protected and surrounded by Him. More than this however, I have a right standing with God and direct access to Him and all the resources He has given me through His son Jesus. I have intimacy and connection now to Almighty God. As Paul said in Romans 8:

(31) What, then, shall we say in response to this?
If God is for us, who can be against us? Romans
8:31 (NIV)

As one who was in Christ, it was Paul's desire to tap into the bountiful resources that were his as a child of God. What Christ has done has radically changed our position with God. As children in good standing, we are able to face this life and all that it throws at us with tremendous confidence and assurance. I am accepted by God. All has been forgiven. The power and resources of God Almighty are at my disposal.

If we are to be victorious over the trials that come our way, we must live with the understanding of our position "in Christ" and His righteousness in us. Satan will do all he can to hide these truths from us but nothing can change our position. We are loved and secure in Christ no matter

what may happen to us. The enemy may torment or even kill our body, but the richness of our position in Christ can never be stripped from us. This is a gift of God made possible through the death of His Son --a gift that can never be taken from us.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to be “in Christ?” What does it mean to be righteous?
- What is the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ? How does this righteousness give us access to God?
- How does knowing our position in Christ help us in the trials of life? What confidence does this give us to face the difficulties before us?

For Prayer:

Lord Jesus I thank You that You lived a perfect life. I thank You that Your sacrifice perfectly satisfied the legal demands of the Father so that I could be forgiven for my sin. I thank You that Your work covers all my sin and shame. I ask that You would help me to understand that Your work gives me a new standing before the Father. I ask that I would be given grace to live as one who has been forgiven and cleansed. I ask that I would boldly claim the position and the blessings that Christ died for me to obtain. Help me to live as a child of the King. Thank you that all your resources are at my disposal. Thank you that I can face life and death with confidence and assurance that I am in a right relationship with you. Thank You that that, as one

who has been accepted, I am surrounded by Your presence. Thank You for the hope this gives in the trials of life.

4

RESURRECTION POWER

(10) I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. Philippians 3:10-11 (NIV)

In the previous chapters we saw that the goal of Paul's life was to know Christ and be found in Him. As one who was now in a right standing with God, Paul wanted to tap into all the resources that were at his disposal in Christ. Here in Philippians 3:10, Paul introduces us to one of those resources. He told the Philippians that, as a believer "in Christ," he wanted to know the power of Christ's resurrection.

Resurrection power is the power to restore what has died. When sin entered the world through Adam and Eve it brought death. God warned Eve that if she ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, she and her husband would die.

(2) The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, (3) but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in

the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.” Genesis 3:2-3 (NIV)

We learn from Romans 5 that, as a result of sin, Adam’s descendants would be born under the curse of death even though they had not yet sinned by breaking God’s law.

(14) Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come. Romans 5:14 (NIV)

When sin entered the Garden of Eden everything changed. From that moment on, all of creation was subject to frustration, bondage and decay.

(19) The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. (20) For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope (21) that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (22) We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8:19-22 (NIV)

Human beings began to grow weak with age. Animals and plants suffered from the same curse. Everything on earth began to grow old, decay and die. We have become so used to death and decay that we fail to see how devastating this was for the earth. Sin brought a curse of physical death to this earth.

The curse of sin was not limited to physical death. It also brought spiritual death. Human beings were plunged into the darkness of separation from God. Fellowship and intimacy with their Creator was destroyed. Sin was so horrible to God that no sinner could approach Him and live. God's penalty for sin was physical and spiritual death. Instead of enjoying friendship with God, every human being born under this curse was separated from Him and lived under His eternal wrath.

(23) For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (NIV)

Sin brought both physical and spiritual death. Children would watch their parents grow old and die. Husbands and wives would be separated in the same way. Parents would sit by the beds of their sick and dying babies and watch them pass into eternity. Children would be born with deadness in their heart toward God. Families would be broken by addictions, violence and pride. All of this would be the fruit of sin and separation from God and His purposes.

When Paul speaks about the power of Christ's resurrection, he is speaking about the power to strip sin of its authority and restore what it has taken away. Paul expected to experience this resurrection power in two ways.

First, Paul expected that this resurrection power would raise his physical body from the grave. Sin brought sickness and death. The apostle knew that because of Christ's work, he now had victory over physical death. While his earthly body would die, he would rise again to be forever with the Lord.

(11) And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Romans 8:11 (NIV)

Death was not an end for Paul. He had a hope beyond the grave.

Second, Paul believed that Christ's resurrection power would break the power and authority of sin and death in his spiritual life. He recognized and hated the deadness of sin he experienced in his heart but trusted in Christ's resurrection power to give him victory.

(21) So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. (22) For in my inner being I delight in God's law; (23) but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. (24) What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (25) Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:21-25 (NIV)

Paul's pain was obvious as he struggled with the deadness of sin in his heart. Only the resurrection power of Christ could bring life to this darkness. Paul's great desire was to know the power of Christ to overcome sin and death in his life and restore his fellowship with God.

Resurrection power will bring healing to the hurts and pains caused by sin. It will restore wholeness where sin has brought destruction in our lives. Resurrection power

strips sin of its authority and brings hope and renewal to hearts and lives broken by its curse.

Have you been frustrated with the deadness of your own heart? Have you longed to see victory over the effects of sin and evil? Has sin stripped you of joy and spiritual vitality? Have the hurts and pains caused by sin plunged you into darkness and hopelessness? The Lord Jesus has power over sin and the curse of death. Resurrection power is the power to restore life. Jesus alone has this power. He is able to bring life out of deadness. There is no hopeless situation. Sin and the deadness it brings can be overcome through the resurrection power of Christ.

It was the heart of Paul to know the resurrection power of Christ where sin had brought darkness and death. It is the desire of the Lord Jesus to give life where sin and deadness reign in our lives. Will you call out to Him for this life? He will break down the strongholds. He will heal the hurt and pain. He will set you free by the power of His resurrection.

As believers we need to know this resurrection power on a daily basis. We are in constant need of God's healing and life-giving touch. It is important to note that Paul wrote this verse as a mature believer. Even after many years of serving and walking with the Lord, the apostle still cried out to know the resurrection power of Christ. He still had areas of darkness in his life that needed to be conquered.

As we face the trials and struggles of life, our great need is to know the life-giving resurrection power of Christ. Satan would like us to believe that there is no hope for the deadness in our lives. Paul reminds us that Christ's resurrection power has stripped Satan and sin of their authority.

We can live and be hopeful again because Christ has conquered sin and evil. Let us not be content to remain in death when the power of Christ is available to conquer all the effects of sin and bring us life.

For Consideration:

- What effect has sin had on this world? How has it affected us as human beings?
- What is the difference between spiritual and physical death. How has sin brought both spiritual and physical death to this world?
- What hope does the resurrection power of Christ give us over the effects of sin in our lives?
- How has sin brought deadness to your life? Are there areas of your life that need to be touched by the resurrection power of Christ? What are they in particular?

For Prayer:

Father, I realize that I live in a world cursed by sin and death. I have felt the effects of spiritual deadness in my own heart. Living in this sin-cursed world I have often sinned and suffered the effects of the sins of others. I ask Lord that You would expose those areas of sin and deadness in my life. I pray that You would restore life where death and darkness have reigned. Break down the strongholds of sin in me. Give me hope and comfort in the knowledge that You are the God who has conquered death and sin. Thank You that no matter how dark and dead things seem to be, You are the God of resurrection power. In you I have hope.

5

THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERING

(10) I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. Philippians 3:10 (NIV)

From the previous meditation we saw that Paul's desire was to know Christ's life-giving resurrection power. He continues on in verse 10 to say that he also wanted to know the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings.

What is "the fellowship of Christ's suffering"? Let's be clear about a couple of things here. Paul is not saying that he enjoyed suffering or that suffering gave him any special merit with God. In the history of the church there have been individuals who wanted to become martyrs for the cause of Christ. Some of them believed that if they suffered or died for the cause of Christ, they would gain special favour with God. Paul was not of this opinion. He did not serve the Lord to gain favour. He already knew the fullness of God's favour in his life. Because of Christ, he enjoyed a perfect standing with the Father. In fact, Paul was

overwhelmed by the depths of undeserved kindness he had already received from God.

(33) Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
(34) "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" (35) "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"
(36) For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. Romans 11:33-36 (NIV)

Second, when Paul said he wanted to know the fellowship of sharing in the sufferings of Christ, he was not saying that he could add anything to what Christ had already done. The work of Christ for his salvation was complete. When Jesus died on the cross, He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30, NIV). This meant that all that needed to be done had been done. The wrath of God was completely satisfied in the work of the Lord Jesus. His sacrifice was a one-time sacrifice for all people and all time and completely fulfilled all the demands of the Father for our salvation.

(18) For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit. 1 Peter 3:18 (NIV)

Paul, of all people, knew that he could not add anything to what Christ had done for his salvation. His confidence was completely in the finished work of the Lord Jesus.

To understand what Paul means we need to take note of the word "fellowship." Paul longed for fellowship. Paul's

desire here is not to suffer but to know deeper intimacy with Christ.

My wife and I served as missionaries on the island of Mauritius. The church to which we had been called was a struggling church divided by internal conflict. The problems we were dealing with began to weigh heavy on my heart as pastor. While serving in the church, I received news from a good friend working in France. He shared, in great detail, how the Lord was blessing his work and opening wonderful doors of opportunity in ministry. As I listened to this news, I found my heart breaking. I wrestled with the fact that God had so wonderfully blessed my friend's ministry while my own was struggling.

I remember crying out to God at that time, "Lord, I don't understand. Why have you given him such a blessed ministry when I feel like I am spinning my wheels getting nowhere?" As I prayed, the Lord brought to remembrance, the story of the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and how they saw the glory of the Lord (Matthew 17:1-2). "Lord," I cried, "my friend is experiencing You in the same way as those three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. He's right there in your glorious presence." Feeling sorry for myself I continued, "Lord, I feel like I am in the furnace struggling with one trial after another." As I prayed that prayer the Lord suddenly brought to mind the story of Daniel's three friends in the furnace. He reminded me of how He had revealed His glorious presence to them as well (see Daniel 3). As I reflected on this, I felt the Lord speak to my heart and say: "Wayne, do you think that My presence was any less for Daniel's friends in the furnace than it was for the disciples on the mountaintop?" I realized that the presence of the Lord can be as real or even more real in suffering as it is in the good times.

God gets our attention in the difficult times more than at any other time. We are more willing to listen to Him when things are stripped away. The lessons learned in the valleys of life are often more powerful than those learned in times of ease. We are refined and purified under pressure.

The psalmist tells us that we can know the presence of God in a special way as we pass through the deep valleys of life. Listen to the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 23:4-5:

- (4) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- (5) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Psalms 23:4-5 (NIV)

There are several things we need to notice in this Psalm. Notice that the Psalmist tells us that he did not fear the “valley of the shadow of death” because the Lord God would be with him. He would not have to go through the valley alone. When things were dark he would know the presence of the Lord God beside him. God would walk with him through the valley.

While the trials and suffering that came his way were not easy, the Psalmist declared secondly that the rod of God was his comfort. The rod was what the shepherd used to lead and protect the sheep from the enemy or any dangers on the way. The rod could be used secondly, to defend them against the enemy. Finally, it was also be used to keep the sheep on the right path. The Psalmist knew God’s wonderful comfort, protection and guidance in the times of deepest pain.

Notice third that the Lord prepared a table for the psalmist and anointed his head with oil in the presence of his enemies. The table and the oil were both signs of rich blessing. God's rich blessing was being poured out in the most difficult moments of his life. As his enemies watched, God lavished the psalmist with the richest of food and poured oil over his head. You can almost sense the confusion of the enemy. As the enemy lashed out, God drew close. His presence became evident during those times of suffering, enabling him to soak in the blessing of God as his enemy sought to harm him. He is particularly aware of God's favour at this time. His heart overflowed with gratitude to God for the fellowship he experienced in this time of need.

I believe that Paul knew this wonderful fellowship in his suffering. He did not fear what people would do to him. He did not fear to face his trials. He knew that no matter how difficult things became, God would be with him. He would know His presence and blessing in his deepest trials. I believe that the fellowship Paul experienced in his suffering was so wonderful that he almost wished he could remain there just to know the closeness and intimacy of Christ.

There is another aspect to this fellowship of Christ's suffering we need to examine. Paul's great desire in life was to share Christ with those around him. He wanted them to know the salvation of Christ and glorify Him as their Lord. Paul was willing to pay the ultimate price to share the good news of salvation and hope in Christ. He suffered tremendously as he shared the gospel with others. His message was not always well received. He was beaten, stoned, and mocked. He often risked his life to share the good news of Christ's work.

When the Lord called Ananias to speak to Paul just after the apostle's conversion, he told him that Paul would have to suffer much for His cause:

(15) But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. (16) I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Acts 9:15-16 (NIV)

Paul knew what it was like to suffer for Christ and the advancement of His kingdom. He told Timothy that anyone who wanted to live a godly life would have to suffer:

(12) In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 2 Timothy 3:12 (NIV)

The Lord Jesus told His disciples that there would be a price to pay for following Him as His disciples.

(23) Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. Luke 9:23 (NIV)

If you want to be a follower of the Lord Jesus in a dark and sinful world, then you need to be ready to suffer for His name. You will not always be accepted. Satan will do his utmost to hinder you. You will become the object of his attacks. Don't let this discourage you. God promises to walk with you through the valleys of life. He will draw near to strengthen and bless you in those times.

When God called the apostle Paul to minister in His name, He called him to a ministry that would require suffering and

persecution. Paul was not afraid of this. In fact, he was willing to suffer so that others might hear of Christ and come to Him. This was the attitude of the apostles in Acts 5:41. When they had been beaten for preaching the gospel they rejoiced to be counted worthy of such suffering.

(41) The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Acts 5:41 (NIV)

Do you know this joyous fellowship with Christ in your suffering today? If you are like me, you will need to have your eyes opened to the reality that He has not abandoned you in your pain. His presence is still very real. Open your eyes to see Him. Make a special effort to watch for Him and the evidence of His presence. He promises to walk with you in these times. You will not walk through the valley alone. Will you pick up your cross with gladness of heart today for the privilege of partnering with Him in the expansion of His kingdom? As we face the trials of this life it is important that we also understand that we are not alone. We join with Christ who also suffered for us. In our pain, we can know His peace. In our trials we can know His comfort and fellowship.

For Consideration:

- Considering Psalm 23, what are the benefits a believer receives from the Lord as he or she walks through the valley of the shadow of death?
- Have you experienced fellowship with the Lord in suffering? Give an example of how the Lord drew close to you in your time of need.

- What are you willing to suffer to accomplish the will and purpose of the Lord for your life?
- What evidence is there of God's presence in your suffering today? Make a list of ways God has been revealing His presence to you.

For Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You willingly laid down Your life for me. Thank You that You suffered so that I could be forgiven and be with You for all eternity. I realize that as I stand up for You and the cause of the gospel, I will suffer persecution. Thank You for Your promise never to leave me in those times. Open my eyes to see Your presence in the deepest valleys of life. Draw close to me in my deepest hour of need. Thank you for the examples in Scripture of those who have known deep and intimate fellowship with You in the trials and sufferings of life. May I know this same intimate fellowship as I suffer with You in advancing Your kingdom.

6

BECOMING LIKE HIM IN HIS DEATH

(10) I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, (11) and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Philippians 3:10-11 (NIV)

When faced with the awful death of the cross, the Lord Jesus cried out to His Father:

(42) “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” Luke 22:42 (NIV)

Despite the terrible pain and agony associated with His death, the Lord Jesus was willing to lay down everything to accomplish the will and purpose of His Father.

When the apostle Paul said that he wanted to become like Christ in His death, he was saying that he was willing to lay down everything he had, just as his Lord had done for

him. There was nothing he would not sacrifice for his Lord. Paul so identified with the cross of the Lord Jesus that he saw himself as having died with Christ on that cross. He no longer lived for himself. His life was dedicated to the will and purpose of his Lord. Writing in Galatians 2:20 he said:

(20) I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20 (NIV)

When warned about the dangers facing him in Jerusalem, the apostle responded:

(13) "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Acts 21:13 (NIV)

He told his friends and supporters in Ephesus that he considered his life worth nothing if he did not use it to complete the task God had given him.

[24] However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. Acts 20:24 (NIV)

Paul saw it to be his solemn obligation to follow the example of his Lord by offering his body as a living sacrifice and urged all believers to do the same.

(12:1) Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Romans 12:1 (NIV)

Paul's great desire was to be like Christ in His death. He would lay down his life as a sacrifice just as Christ had done for him.

Jesus also laid down his life as an act of obedience to His Father's will. Not all sacrifices are acts of obedience. The prophet Samuel rebuked King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22 when he made a sacrifice in disobedience to God's command. Jesus told the following parable in the Gospel of Luke:

(10) "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. (12) I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' (13) "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' (14) "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Luke 18:10-14 (NIV)

Notice in the parable that the Pharisee fasted and gave a tithe of all he had but he did so in a way that dishonoured the Lord. He was a proud man who looked down on others and saw himself as being more spiritual than his brother.

God refused his sacrifice. God does not accept all sacrifices. We can offer sacrifices to God with wrong attitudes like the Pharisee in this parable. We can also make sacrifices that God has never asked us to make.

Paul wanted to fight the fight God had given him to fight. He wanted to run the race God had given him to run. Nearing the time of his death, the apostle said to Timothy:

(6) For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.
 (7) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (8) Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. 2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NIV)

You can't read this passage without seeing the assurance in Paul that he had done what God had required of him. He had fought "the good fight." He had finished "the" race and kept "the" faith. He is very specific here. It was not just any fight but "the" fight. In other words, it was the fight God had given him to fight, the race God had called him to run and the faith God had given him to preach. He would go to meet his Lord now with the assurance that the sacrifices he had made in life were pleasing and honoring to his Saviour. He had been obedient.

Many a weary servant has given up because of the struggles that have come their way. Others, tempted and motivated by pride, have built a name for themselves doing something God never called them to do. How easy it is to lose sight of the purpose of God. Satan's goal is to distract us. He may discourage us through struggles or sidetrack

us with success. Jesus only did what the father told him to do.

(19) Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. John 5:19 (NIV)

Our Lord lived and died in absolute obedience to the will and purpose of the Father. His sacrificial death was an act of obedience. He faced death knowing that He had been faithful to the Father's purpose. This was Paul's desire as well.

Paul reminded Timothy that an athlete only wins the prize if he competes according to the rules:

(5) Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. 2 Timothy 2:5 (NIV)

Paul wanted his sacrifices to be acts of obedience to the Lord God. He wanted to compete according to the rules so that his life and death would be pleasing to Christ. Jesus' death was an act of obedience to the Father. Paul wanted to be like the Lord in his death.

There is a final point we need to make about the death of the Lord Jesus. Christ's death was also a victorious death. It was not the end. He conquered the grave. He rose victoriously over death and went to be with His Father in heaven. Paul firmly believed that he too would experience that same victory in his death. Writing to the Corinthians he said:

(5:1) Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.
(2) Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. 2 Corinthians 5:1-2 (NIV)

Paul's death, like that of Christ's, would be a stepping stone to something greater. He would be raised to life and enter the presence of the Father. By his death, Paul would "attain to the resurrection from the dead" (verse 11). There was great hope in death for Paul. The Lord had conquered the grave and he would as well. Death held no terror for the apostle. It was the door to an eternity with Christ and a pathway to victory. People could take his life but they could not strip him of his hope. He longed for the day when he would pass from this life into the presence of his Lord.

How did Jesus die? He died a sacrificial death. He died an obedient death. He died victorious over the grave. Paul wanted to live and die the same way. Is this your commitment today? Will you commit yourself to both living and dying as Jesus did? As we face the trials before us, we must, like Paul, commit ourselves to following the example of our Lord Jesus by offering ourselves sacrificially and obediently to the will of the Father, knowing that no matter what happens we will be victorious through Christ.

For Consideration:

- List three words that describe the death of the Lord Jesus as discussed in this chapter.
- Is it possible to make sacrifices for the Lord Jesus but not be living in obedience to His will for our lives? Explain. Have you ever made sacrifices that were not in God's purpose?
- Take a moment to consider your life? Have you been living a sacrificial, obedient and victorious life?
- What hope and confidence do you find in that fact that even in death we can be victorious? How does this knowledge affect how you live and serve the Lord today?

For Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You laid down Your life in sacrificial obedience to the will and purpose of Your Father. I thank You that You laid it down in victory over death and the grave. Thank You that I, too, can know that same victory. I ask that as I lay my life down I would have no regrets in life. I pray that I would know Your will and live in it. I ask that you would help me not to be distracted by the temptations of the enemy. As I face the temptations and trials of this life may I be like Christ in His death, sacrificing all in obedience to the Father. May I be comforted in the knowledge that what I lay down in obedient sacrifice will rise up again in wonderful victory.

7

NOT THAT I HAVE ALREADY ATTAINED

(12) Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. (13) Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. Philippians 3:12 (NIV)

I remember talking to an acquaintance some years ago. Speaking about his pastor, he told me, "There is nothing more he can teach me, I've heard it all." This man had the belief that he had arrived spiritually at a point where there was nothing more he could learn. This was not the attitude of the apostle Paul. Notice in this verse that Paul knew he had not yet obtained all that the Lord had for him. Because of this, he determined in his heart to press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus had taken hold of him.

I was speaking with a pastor friend some time ago about the qualifications of leaders in Scripture. As we spoke we began to realize that if we expected perfection, not one of us could ever serve the Lord. In Titus 1:6-8 the apostle

Paul told his readers that an elder was to be blameless, hospitable, holy and disciplined. Consider this for a moment. The apostle Paul persecuted the church. Was he blameless? How about yourself? Are you as hospitable as you could be? Do you always live a holy life? Are you as disciplined in your spiritual walk as the Lord would have you to be? If we are honest with ourselves, we would all have to admit, like Paul, that not one of us has obtained this perfection.

Sometime ago I heard an illustration about a man walking to a friend's home on the other side of a forest. It was a dark night and the man could not see clearly where he was going. As he walked, his foot struck the root of an old tree, tripping him. He fell into a puddle of muddy water. He got back on his feet and continued his journey, brushing himself off as best he could. Finally, in the distance, he saw the light of his friend's home. As he drew closer to the light, he looked down at his clothes and noticed some dirt he had not seen in the darkness of the forest. He brushed it off and continued toward the light. The closer he got to the light, the more dirt he saw. Is it not this way in our Christian life? The closer to get to the Lord Jesus the more we realize our sinfulness. The more we see the Lord Jesus, the more we recognize our own weakness.

I often tell people that the biggest thing I learned in Bible school and seminary was how much I didn't know. It seemed that the more I learned, the more questions I had. I was speaking with a man some time ago who told me he couldn't understand the doctrine of the Trinity. Because he could not understand it, he refused to believe. I reminded him that if we could understand everything there was about God, then He would be no bigger than our mind. There is a strange comfort in the fact that we can never fully understand God and His ways. Do we really think we could know

all there is to know about God? Do we really think that we can predict His ways and understand why He does what He does? Job's friends thought they could do this, but they were sadly mistaken. God is far bigger than our minds. Speaking to the people of Isaiah's day the Lord said:

[9] "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:9
(NIV)

Listen to what God said through the apostle Paul about the things He has prepared for those who love Him:

[9] However, as it is written: "No eye has seen,
no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what
God has prepared for those who love him"— 1 Co-
rinthians 2:9 (NIV)

Notice here that the human mind cannot even conceive or imagine what God has prepared. In other words, God's plan and purpose for those who love Him is beyond their ability to imagine or understand. There is a wonderful mystery to God and His ways.

Paul told the Ephesians that God was able to do "immeasurably more" than they could ask or imagine:

[20] Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, [21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV)

He told the Romans that God's riches, wisdom and judgments were unsearchable and beyond tracing out:

[33] Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! [34] "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" Romans 11:33-34 (NIV)

There was a mystery to God and His ways that Paul, with all his understanding and spiritual discernment, could not grasp. The great apostle Paul stood in awe at this wonderful God whose ways were higher and greater than his mind could ever imagine. How easy it is to think that because we have taken a course in theology we understand God and His purposes. Paul is telling us that God is bigger than this. To believe that we have learned all there is to know about God is to diminish Him in our minds. To believe that we have arrived spiritually is to make ourselves equal to God who alone is perfect. The apostle Paul realized that he still had much to learn. He had not yet obtained all that God had for him. We would do well to recognize this as well.

Not only can we not ever fully understand God and His ways, but the reality of the matter is that we can never truly even understand ourselves. If we are open, God will teach us things about ourselves that we never knew. He has a way of revealing our hidden motives, intentions and attitudes. Peter's denial of the Lord served to show him his weakness. This was something he had not seen in himself. There have been many times in my life when God has exposed my errors and sins. He has uncovered wrong attitudes and laid bare my weaknesses. God knows things about me that I do not even know. He sees things in me

that I cannot yet see. He has purposes for my life that He has not yet revealed to me.

Listen to Paul's warning to the Corinthians:

[12] So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 1 Corinthians 10:12 (NIV)

Peter did not plan on denying the Lord Jesus. He believed himself to be strong. God showed him his weakness. David did not wake up in the morning thinking that this would be the day he would commit adultery. These great men of God fell flat on their faces and were humbled through their circumstances. They came to understand, as did the apostle Paul, that they had not obtained all that God had in store for them. They had much to learn. They still needed to grow.

Job was stripped of everything he had. His health and children were taken from him. As he reflected on God and His ways, he said in the end:

[5] My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Job 42:5 (NIV)

There is a great difference between hearing about God and seeing Him. For many people, God is a theology to be learned or a set of traditions to be maintained, but God is far bigger than this. Job experienced God in his suffering in a way that many in his time had never experienced God. Job is described by God in Job 1:1 as "blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil" but by the end of his suffering he boldly declared, "now my eyes have seen you." Like Paul, Job, though he was blameless, had not obtained all that God had for him. God revealed Himself

more fully to Job through the trials he experienced. Listen to what the writer to the Hebrews had to say about the Lord Jesus.

[7] During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. [8] Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. Hebrews 5:7-8 (NIV)

If Jesus learned from what He suffered, surely we, too, have much to learn. Paul knew that he had not yet arrived. This attitude of humility opened the way for God to do a greater work in his life. You can't grow if you believe that you have already arrived. You can't learn if you think you have nothing more to learn.

Will you allow God to use the circumstances of your life to teach you and draw you closer to Him? Will you open your mind to learn what He wants to show you through the situations He brings your way? Will you recognize that you have not yet obtained all that God has for you and open your hands to receive more?

There is much more that God wants to teach us. Like Paul, let's recognize our shortcomings and open our hearts for God to reveal Himself and His purposes in a deeper way. If we are going to live victoriously over the struggles of this life we must be ready to learn the lessons God wants to teach us in the things we suffer.

For Consideration:

- Do you think we can ever completely understand God and His ways? To what extent will God and His ways always be a mystery to us?
- Why is it uncomfortable for us not to understand God and His ways? Can you live realizing that there is much about God you may never completely understand?
- What has God been teaching you in recent months?
- Paul said that he had not obtained all that God had for him nor had he yet reached perfection. What areas of your life need work? Where are your weaknesses? What more does God want to do in you?
- How does God use the things we suffer to shape us and make us into His image? Are you willing to let God strip you of anything that keeps you from knowing Him in a deeper way?

For Prayer:

Father God, forgive me for believing that I could ever, in my limited understanding, know You completely. Thank You that You are bigger than my imagination and Your ways are past finding out. Father, there are things I do not even understand about myself. Thank You that You are teaching me more of Your purpose for my life. Open my eyes to see my weaknesses and shortcomings. Teach me what you can do through me as I surrender to you. Humble me and give me a teachable heart. May I, like Jesus, learn through the things I suffer.

8

TAKING HOLD

[12] Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Philippians 3:12 (NIV)

There is a further aspect to verse 12 we need to consider. Notice in this verse that Christ Jesus had taken hold of the apostle Paul. Speaking to the Philippians in this verse he said, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

Paul had always been a religious man. As a Pharisee, he was a strict observer of the Law of God. He went above and beyond the call of duty as a Jew. In fact, when Christianity first started showing up in the region, he took a firm and active stand against it, believing it was contrary to the will and purpose of the God he knew and served. Listen to Paul's own words from Acts 26:

[9] “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. [10] And that is just what I did in Jerusalem.

On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. [11] Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. Acts 26:9-11 (NIV)

When Paul encountered the Lord Jesus, however, his life was radically changed. That day the Lord Jesus took hold of Paul. The words “take hold” literally mean to seize or to possess. That is what happened with Paul. The Lord Jesus seized his heart and from that moment on possessed it as Lord and King. He conquered Paul and brought him into submission to His lordship. Paul’s life would never be the same.

From the moment of conversion, Paul realized that he no longer belonged to himself. He lived his life with one goal in mind, to serve the one who had conquered his heart and will. Writing to the Corinthians he said:

[17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

The Lord God put a call in Paul’s heart from which he could never escape. Speaking to the prophet Ananias God said about Paul:

[15] This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. [16] I will show him how

much he must suffer for my name.” Acts 9:15-16 (NIV)

God burned this passion and calling so deeply into Paul’s heart that it became Paul’s life-long obsession.

From the moment Christ took hold of Paul, he was willing to risk everything for His sake. He considered his life worth nothing if he did not use it to complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him.

[24] However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. Acts 20:24 (NIV)

His passion for the call God had put on his heart was so strong that he was willing even to be cursed and cut off from Christ if by doing so he could win those of his own race to saving faith.

[9:1] I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit— [2] I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. [3] For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race. Romans 9:1-3 (NIV)

The prophet Jeremiah also knew something of this calling on his life as well. In Jeremiah 7 he complained to the Lord:

[7] O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.

[8] Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long.
[9] But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. Jeremiah 20:7-9 (NIV)

You can feel the pain in Jeremiah's words. Speaking in the name of the Lord God brought him insult and reproach. People hated him for what he spoke. When he tried to stop speaking in the name of the Lord God, however, he could not hold the words in. The words of God were like fire in his bones waiting to explode.

Someone once said, "If you want to know if you are called to do something, try not doing it." In other words, when God puts a call on your heart, you will find yourself compelled to follow that call. You will never be happy until you are doing what God has called you to do. The call of God may lead you through great difficulty and problems. You may be persecuted and mocked but you will never be happy unless you are faithful to that for which Christ has taken hold of you.

When the Lord Jesus takes hold of our lives He stirs up a passion in our hearts that will not be easily snuffed out. After being beaten by the Jewish ruling council, the apostles left feeling overwhelmed at the privilege that was theirs to suffer for the name of the Lord Jesus.

[41] The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Acts 5:41 (NIV)

The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the great men and women of faith whose hearts had also been conquered by the Lord God.

[32] And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, [33] who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, [34] quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. [35] Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. [36] Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. [37] They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— [38] the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Hebrews 11:32-38 (NIV)

These men and women suffered tremendously at the hands of evil rulers, but they willingly endured the persecution for the joy that was set before them. As we bear the name of the Lord Jesus in this world, there will be struggles and trials. Those hearts Christ has taken hold of, however, do not live for this world and its comforts. Their hearts and wills have been conquered. They live now to love and serve the One who has won their heart. As faithful soldiers of Christ, they endure the pain and count it a privilege to fight and serve their Lord.

Paul's goal in life was to take hold of that for which Christ had taken hold of him. Has the Lord God taken hold of your heart? Has He placed His call on your life? Has the passion to know Him and do His will led you into trouble and difficulty? Will you be faithful to Him and that calling no matter the cost? What a privilege it is to be His ambassador? Our hearts have been captured. Our lives have been changed. The passion for Christ and His purpose moves and motivates us. Like Paul, we too will find ourselves facing the opposition of the enemy. Like Paul, however, we will never be content outside of God's purpose. We can experience the joy of obedience and faithfulness even in the midst of the trials that come our way because we know that we are in His purpose.

On one occasion when everyone else walked away from the Lord Jesus, He asked His disciples if they, too, were going to leave Him. It was Peter who responded

(68) Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom we shall go? You have the words of eternal life.

(69) We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." John 6:68-69 (NIV)

When our hearts and wills have been conquered by Christ, there is nowhere else we can turn. There is ultimately nowhere else we even want to go.

For Consideration:

- What kind of things can capture our heart today?
Are all things that capture our heart from God?
- What is God's particular purpose for you today?
How has He burdened your heart?
- Has obedience to the call of God in your life ever brought you problems and trials? Explain.
- Why do you suppose Paul was willing to endure hardships in life?
- Have you been faithful to the Lord and the call He has placed on your heart?

For Prayer:

Father, I thank you that You captured my heart. Thank you that my life has been changed by Your touch. I surrender my heart and will to You afresh today. I realize that there are times when obedience to You and Your purpose for my life will lead me through difficult waters. I commit myself to obedience and ask for Your strength. I count it a privilege to be faithful to Your call on my life. Thank You that I can know Your presence as I walk in obedience to that call. Thank You that Your purposes are perfect. Teach me to trust your ways and surrender to that purpose. May it be my passion to lay hold of that for which You have laid hold of me no matter the cost.

9

FORGETTING WHAT IS BEHIND

[13] Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead... Philippians 3:13 (NIV)

In verse 13 Paul speaks of forgetting what was behind and straining toward what was ahead. There are several things we need to understand here.

First, when Paul said he forgot what was behind, he is not saying that he no longer remembered his past and the things he had done. The apostle Paul often remembered and wrote about his past. Writing to the believers in Corinth he said:

[9] For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 1 Corinthians 15:9 (NIV)

Paul remembered that he had been a persecutor of the church. He often shared this with those who would listen to his testimony. While he knew the wonderful forgiveness of God, Paul considered himself to have been the worst of all sinners because of his past. He told Timothy:

[15] Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. [16] But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. 1 Timothy 1:15-16 (NIV)

The apostle Paul often marveled at how the Lord Jesus had taken him as a sinner and made him His child. He wanted believers everywhere to remember what Christ had done for him. He challenged the Corinthians believers to remember what they were before they came to Christ.

[26] Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. [27] But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. [28] He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, [29] so that no one may boast before him. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 (NIV)

Moses, too, challenged the children of Israel to remember their past. Writing to the people of his day he said:

[2] Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. [3] He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Deuteronomy 8:2-3 (NIV)

The wilderness was a barren place for God's people. It was a place where God allowed His people to be hungry, weary and tired. They wandered in the heat and dryness of the desert. God did not want His people to forget these struggles.

Paul reminded the believers of the failures of their ancestors in 1 Corinthians 10:

[7] Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." [8] We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. [9] We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. [10] And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. 1 Corinthians 10:7-10 (NIV)

Paul called to remembrance the drunkenness, immorality and blasphemy of their fathers. The Scriptures speak openly of David's sin with Bathsheba, Peter's denial of the Lord and the failures of the kings of Israel. God wants us to see these things in the hope that we will learn from the

failures of those who have gone before us. God calls us to remember our past. Remembering our past gives us great cause to rejoice in what God has done.

What did Paul mean then when he told the Philippians that he forgot what was past? The type of forgetting Paul speaks of here has more to do with his commitment than with his memory. To illustrate this let's consider the story of Lot and his family as recorded in Genesis 19.

In Genesis 19 Lot and his family had just escaped the judgement of God that fell on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The angel of the Lord helped Lot, his wife and two daughters escape the city and told them to flee to the mountains where they would be safe. In Genesis 19:17 the angel commanded them not to look back at the city they had just left. Lot's wife disobeyed and God turned her into a pillar of salt. While we do not know what was in her mind at the time, we could assume that her heart was back in the city she had just left. Did she look back with a longing eye? Was she grieving over all she was leaving behind in that city? Her look back was not just an act of curiosity; it was an act of disobedience that revealed the attitude of her heart.

Consider also the children of Israel who escaped the bondage of Egypt. In Numbers 21 they complained to Moses about the food they were eating in the wilderness. They longed to be back in Egypt. Listen to the record of their complaint in Numbers 21:

[4] They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; [5] they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?

There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" Numbers 21:4-5 (NIV)

Here were people who despised the purpose of God for their lives. God had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt but they longed to be back there. Like Lot's wife, their hearts were not in tune with what God was doing. Their desire was to return to their bondage and sin.

There is a looking back that God hates. The people of Israel despised God's grace in their lives by looking back with longing to the sin and corruption from which He had rescued them. When God rescues us He expects that we continue in that freedom. 2 Peter 2 describes a people who had escaped the corruption of the world only to become entangled in it again. He compared these people to a dog returning to his vomit and a pig that was washed returning to the mud.

[20] If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. [21] It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. [22] Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud." 2 Peter 2:20-22 (NIV)

Speaking to His disciples in the gospel of Luke, the Lord Jesus said:

[62] Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Luke 9:62 (NIV)

When the Lord Jesus said that the one who looks back is not fit for the kingdom of heaven, he was telling His disciples that He expected a change of heart. He expected that when He set them free from the bondage and slavery of this world, they would walk with delight in that freedom. He expected that when He captured their hearts that they would commit themselves to Him and His purpose. To look back with a longing eye to their past would be a great insult to the One who had set them free.

The author to the Hebrews challenged his readers to cast off everything that hindered them and fix their eyes on Christ and His purpose.

[12:1] Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. [2] Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-2 (NIV)

Forgetting what is behind does not mean putting our past out of memory. It is rather a commitment to purposely move forward. Consider an Olympic runner. The runner knows that if he wants to win the race he will need to make the finish line his focus. He does not have time to look behind or beside him to see the other runners. Christ has called us to run the good race. If we are to do so, we will have to make Him our priority and focus. This will mean

putting other things out of our mind in order to focus on winning the race He has called us to run.

When the Lord Jesus called His disciples, they dropped their nets to follow Him (Matthew 4:18-20). Imagine what it would be like if, when the Lord Jesus called them to follow Him, they had dragged their nets behind them. As they walked from town to town those nets would have weighed them down. Carrying those nets would have become a real burden. They would have had to spend so much time untangling them from the obstacles on their way that the work would have suffered. Isn't it like this in our Christian lives? Ungodly attitudes and attachments can be like those nets.

Maybe the net you are dragging behind you is an unforgiving attitude toward a brother or sister in Christ. Forgetting what is behind means letting go of the anger and unforgiving attitudes we have toward those who have hurt us.

[14] For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
Matthew 6:14 (NIV)

Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 10 that those who were not willing to leave their families and all they had behind to follow Him were unworthy of Him. Jesus is looking for followers who will "leave their nets behind" and make Him their focus.

[37] "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.
Matthew 10:37 (NIV)

If we are to follow the Lord, we will need to put aside or “forget” every entanglement. To forget may mean even leaving good things for a greater purpose. God will call some to “forget” their families, their jobs or their comfort to follow Him. He will call others to “forget” their reputation to walk in obedience. We may have been hurt by a brother or sister in the Lord. He calls us to “forget” the insult, accept God’s healing and press forward in love. Paul chose to “forget” his sinful and ungodly attitudes, thoughts and practices. He chose to forget the ways of his old self. He chose to deny his fleshly attitudes and pressed on in faithful obedience to the Lord and his purposes.

The ways of the old nature, the sins that once entangled us or anything that stands between us and our Lord’s purpose must be “forgotten” or cast aside. There can be no ultimate victory until we are willing to forget these things and strive toward God’s purpose.

What is it that entangles you today? What do you need to leave behind? Are you holding on to things that you need to release? Are their attitudes you need to surrender to God? Do you need to forgive a brother or sister? Have you been holding on to something that God wants to take away? May God give us grace today to forget what He is calling us to forget in order to press on in the new life He wants to give. Sometimes the struggle we face is a struggle with forgetting the things God wants us to forget.

For Consideration:

- Does God expect that we will forget where we came from or the things He has done for us? What does it mean to forget what is behind?
- How much of our struggle today has to do with being willing to forget the past and move on?
- Are there things in your life today that God is telling you to “forget?” What are those things? How have they been hindering you in your relationship with the Lord today?

For Prayer:

Father God, I thank You for the wonderful things You have done for me. Thank You that You have taken me from my sinful past and radically changed my life. I ask You to help me never to forget what You have done for me. May I be eternally thankful to You for your gracious work and deliverance. I recognize, Lord, that You are calling me to put aside those things that hinder me in my walk with You today. I pray that you would show me what those hindrances are. I pray that you would give me grace to lay these things aside right now so that I can move forward into deeper intimacy and maturity in You.

10

STRAINING TOWARD WHAT IS AHEAD

(13) Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. Philippians 3:13 (NIV)

In the previous chapter we saw that Paul's commitment was to forget what was behind. He went on in verse 13 to say that, having forgotten what was behind, he now strained toward what was ahead.

The word “strain” can also be interpreted to mean “stretch.” Paul was saying that he stretched himself in his effort to reach the goal God had for him. There are those who do not believe that “strain” should be part of the Christian life. Many evangelists of our day preach a gospel of prosperity, health and ease. They tell people that if they come to Christ everything will go well for them. At the first sign of struggle, their converts become bewildered and disillusioned because they are not prepared for the battle they

find themselves facing. They did not come to Christ to suffer. They came to him, like many people of Jesus' day, for what He could do for them. They are not prepared to be stretched.

Other believers see straining to be a lack of trust in the work of God's Spirit. They feel that if the Spirit of God is in control, there should not be any strain. They believe that the Spirit-filled life is a life of constant peace and rest. Straining means that we are striving in our human effort to do what God wants to do in us.

Paul committed himself to straining in his walk with the Lord Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 9 he compared the Christian life to a race.

(24) Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. (25) Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (26) Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. (27) No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NIV)

Paul speaks here about strict training, fighting, beating his body and making it a slave. There is strain in these words. There is a human cost to walking with the Lord. Like the athlete, Paul pushed and disciplined himself in his spiritual walk. He brought his body and mind into subjection to the will and purpose of the Lord God. He took an active role, using all the strength and energy God gave him, to become all God had called him to be.

Jesus told His disciples that if they were to follow Him they would need to pick up their cross (Matthew 16:24). Paul told the Thessalonian believers they were to pray continuously (1 Thessalonians 5:17). He encouraged Timothy to do his best to present himself approved before God as one who correctly handled the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15). Paul disciplined his body to bring it into submission to the cause of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:27). The Christian life requires sacrifice, discipline, study and submission. These things are all part of the straining that Paul speaks about in this passage.

Having said this, it is important that we understand the role of the Spirit in our relationship with Christ. In Paul's day there were individuals in Galatia who taught that believers needed to live the Christian life purely in human effort. They reduced the Christian life to a series of laws and regulations to be obeyed. Listen to the response of Paul to this teaching.

(3:1) You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. (2) I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? (3) Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (4) Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? (5) Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? Galatians 3:1-5 (NIV)

Paul clearly condemned those who taught that true growth in the Christian life was purely the result of human effort.

How do we reconcile Paul's teaching in Galatians 3 with what he is saying in Philippians 3 about straining? To understand this we need to understand how the Spirit of God works.

The Holy Spirit Works in Cooperation with the Human Will

We need to recognize first that the Spirit of God co-operates with our human will. God does not take away our freedom of choice. Consider for example what took place in the Garden of Eden. God placed the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the middle of the garden and told Adam and Eve that they were not to eat from it. When tempted by Satan, both Adam and Eve chose to disobey. God did not stop them. He allowed them to disobey, but they suffered the consequences of their disobedience.

Listen to the advice of the apostle Paul to the Ephesians.

(29) Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (30) And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (31) Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. (32) Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:29-32 (NIV)

Notice that it was possible for the Galatian believers to grieve the Holy Spirit and allow unwholesome talk to come from their mouths. They could allow bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander to take over their lives. All

around the world, Christians fall into sin and disobedience. God does not always stop them.

The Holy Spirit wants to lead us, but we need to listen and follow. He will not always force us into obedience. As believers we need to learn to die to our own ideas and plans in order to follow the will and leading of the Spirit. Even the apostle Paul struggled to walk in obedience to the leading of the Spirit of God. He makes this quite clear in Romans 7 when he says:

(15) I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. (16) And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. (17) As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. (18) I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. (19) For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (20) Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (21) So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. (22) For in my inner being I delight in God's law; (23) but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. (24) What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
Romans 7:15-24 (NIV)

Part of Paul's straining had to do with learning to bring his mind and will into subjection to the will and purpose of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit will lead and enable us, but

He expects that we co-operate with Him. This may involve straining and being stretched.

God's Spirit Empowers Human Bodies

There is a second truth we need to understand in this context. The Spirit of God empowers weak human bodies and minds. Paul spoke of this in 2 Corinthians 4:

(7) But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (8) We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; (9) persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (10) We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. (11) For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. (12) So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 (NIV)

The Holy Spirit comes to live in every child of God. He pours His wonderful power into weak and frail "jars of clay". These bodies and minds of ours are subject to weakness. Notice what Paul says about these weak vessels in which the Spirit of God dwells. He tells us that they can be pressed on every side. They can be perplexed, persecuted and struck down. Our bodies feel pain and suffering. Our minds are often puzzled by what God is doing. Part of the strain Paul experienced in ministry was the strain on his human body and mind. He knew what it was like to be stoned or rejected in communities where he preached. He suffered physically for the cause of the Lord. He wrestled to understand what God was doing. What would it have

been like to be kicked out of one city after another? Imagine the emotional toll this took on Paul's mind? We sometimes feel that Paul was superhuman and did not experience the emotional struggles we face. Paul was as human as you and me. He knew what it was like to be discouraged and downcast. He grieved when people turned their back on the Lord Jesus. Listen to what he shared with the Corinthians believers in 2 Corinthians 11:

(27) I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (28) Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. 2 Corinthians 11:27-28 (NIV)

Paul went without sleep, water, food and clothing. There was a physical cost to service. Notice also that he faced daily the pressure of his concern for the churches. There was also an emotional cost to pay. He uses the word "pressure" to speak about his concern for the churches. In other words, his concern weighed heavy on his heart and mind. Did Paul trust the Lord to work in the lives of his converts? He certainly did. Despite his trust in God, however, he still felt deep concern. God still demanded an intense physical effort that cost him his physical strength.

Did the Lord Jesus face the cross without strain or struggle? Listen to Luke's description of Jesus in the garden just prior to His crucifixion:

(44) And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Luke 22:44 (NIV)

Notice how Luke describes the anguish that Jesus faced. His body was stretched to its limits as he faced the cross. His emotions were put to the test as He "agonized" over what was about to happen. Did Jesus trust the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit when He anguished? He certainly did. Anguish and strain are not necessarily signs of mistrust? Jesus felt emotional and physical anguish, but chose to walk in obedience to God.

If we are to walk in obedience to the Spirit of God we will need, like Paul, to discipline our bodies and make them our slaves. This will mean facing the struggles and disappointments that come our way. It will mean dealing with weak and tired bodies. It will mean facing our fears.

Paul challenged believers to put on the full armour of God so that they would be able to stand against the devil's evil schemes (see Ephesians 6:10-18). We must be prepared for a long and fierce battle. We should never think that the Christian life will be easy. We can expect strain and struggle ahead. Our bodies will grow tired and our minds will face discouragements. We will sometimes be in anguish of spirit. Our minds will struggle to understand God's ways. We will be perplexed and downcast. Many wonderful men and women of faith before us faced the same. Jesus knew what it was like to be tired, weary and in anguish of mind. None of this, however, needs to keep us from living as God requires. The power of God's Spirit is working in our frail human bodies and minds. Our bodies and minds will be strained, but we can walk in obedience and victory because of God's enabling presence.

My son used to play on a baseball team. Sometimes the other team did not have enough players show up to form a team and would have to forfeit the match. My son's team would win without having to play the game. This is how

many believers want to live the Christian life. They want to win without having to play the game. They don't want to put in the effort. They don't want to take any hits from the opposition. The Lord calls us to play the game of life. This means having to face the opposing team, led by Satan himself. He will do all he can to trip us or discourage us. Our bodies will grow tired and our hearts will sometimes become discouraged. Athletes know, however, that they need to overcome these physical and emotional hurdles if they are going to win the game. While there will be opposition, the Lord God promises to be with us. He will empower our weak bodies and minds and give us the strength to carry on. The pain will be real and the confusion certain, but just as real will be the encouragement and support of God's Spirit. He will work in us and through us to accomplish His purposes.

Paul knew that living the Christian life would not be easy. He recognized that while the Holy Spirit would do a wonderful work in him, he needed to submit to God's leading and walk in obedience. There were times when Paul did not understand God's ways. He bore on his body the marks of obedience. His body was broken and his mind placed under tremendous pressure, but God's Spirit continued to empower and keep him. Are you willing to "strain toward what is ahead" like Paul did? Will you make it your commitment to follow the Lord even when there is a physical and emotional cost to pay? May God give us grace to be faithful and diligent servants as we strain toward the goal.

For Consideration:

- How would you answer those who believe that the Christian life should be trouble free? What does the Scripture teach about the struggles that will inevitably come our way as we seek to serve the Lord?
- Does the Holy Spirit remove all “straining” in the Christian life? Explain.
- How have you been straining in your Christian life? How do you think the Holy Spirit wants to minister to you in that strain?

For Prayer:

Father God, I recognize that You have called me to do battle against Satan and sin. I recognize that as a soldier of the cross there will be “straining” and hard work ahead. I pray that You would help me to bear the strain and walk in faithfulness. I ask that You would minister to my weakness. Strengthen my body and mind so that I can serve you faithfully as I strain toward what is ahead.

11

WINNING THE PRIZE

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:14 (NIV)

It is hard to persevere if we have no purpose. A firm commitment to a purpose, however, gives us strength to carry on even when things become difficult. Paul had a clear purpose in life. In verse 14 he told his readers that he pressed on “toward the goal to win the prize for which God had called him heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Notice that Paul’s goal was to win a prize. There are those who believe that it is wrong for believers to focus on their reward. They teach that a believer needs to be willing to obey the Lord even when there is no reward simply because it is the right thing to do. While this may be true, it is not how God works. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God rewards those who earnestly seek him:

(6) And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe

that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

The Old Testament law required that when an ox was treading the grain it was not to be muzzled (Deuteronomy 25:4). This shows us something about the heart of God even toward the animals He created. Muzzling an ox would have hindered it from eating the grain while it was working. God required that even the ox be rewarded for its services. Paul told Timothy that if the ox was worthy of his reward then those who preached the gospel should be doubly rewarded.

(17) The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. (18) For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." 1 Timothy 5:17-18 (NIV)

The apostle James reminded his readers that God promised a "crown of life" to those who persevered under trials.

(12) Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. James 1:12 (NIV)

Repeatedly in the book of Revelation we read about the crowns that God will give to those who love Him and endure to the end (see Revelation 2:10; 3:11). It is true that the Lord God could demand service without reward, but this is not how He treats His servants. God rewards all who serve Him. He delights to pour out His blessings on all who are faithful.

What should be our response to God's desire to reward His servants? Some time ago the Lord showed me a picture of a young child who had just received a brand new tricycle from his father. I watched this child driving his tricycle in front of his house with great enjoyment. As I looked toward the house, I could see the father looking out the window. I could see the delight in the father's face as he watched his child enjoy the gift he had just given. The Lord reminded me that day that one of the greatest ways to say "thank-you" to Him is to enjoy His gifts.

Have you ever given someone a gift only to see them put it away and never use it? How does that make you feel? On the other hand, does it not delight your heart to see someone enjoy what you have given? How do you think it makes God feel when we believe or teach that to enjoy, delight or desire His gifts and rewards would be wrong?

Paul knew he was unworthy of the prize that God had for him. This did not stop him, however, from delighting and desiring it. Paul lived and served to obtain God's reward. Writing to the Corinthians he said:

(25) Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (26) Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. (27) No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. 1 Corinthians 9:25-27 (NIV)

Paul ran the race to obtain the prize. He fought to receive his reward. He lived in such a way that he would not be disqualified for the winner's crown.

Jesus taught His disciples in Matthew 5 to rejoice and be glad because of their reward in heaven.

(11) "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. (12) Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:11-12 (NIV)

To do any less would be an insult the Giver of the reward.

Philippians 3:14 tells us several things about the prize God had for Paul and all who serve Him faithfully. Notice first in this verse that the prize was a prize to which God had called Paul.

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me... Philippians 3:14 (NIV)

We understand from this that the call of God on Paul's life was to live and minister in such a way that he would receive the prize prepared for him. God expects nothing less of us today. Not all believers will receive the prize. All too many are content to live their lives with a minimum of strain and toil. Paul speaks about this in 1 Corinthians 3:

(12) If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, (13) his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. (14) If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. (15) If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one

escaping through the flames. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 (NIV)

The apostle told the Corinthian church that their work as believers would be tried by fire. Only those whose work survived would receive their reward. This implies that there will be believers who will not receive the reward God has prepared for them. Paul's intention, according to Philippians 3:14, was to live and minister in such a way that he received what God had for him. This would require faithful and hard service.

The second thing we discover about the prize God had prepared for Paul was that it was not of this world. Verse 14 tells us that God called Paul "heavenward" for his reward. There are those who serve God for what they can get out of Him in this life. They teach that if we are faithful, God will bless us with money and possessions in this world. God may certainly do this but this is not what Paul is saying in the passage. He told the Philippians in verse 14 that his great reward was in heaven. Paul, like the Lord Jesus, had very few possessions in this life. In fact, many of God's servants have very little to call their own. The writer to the Hebrews speaks about men and women like this in Hebrews 11:

(32) And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, (33) who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, (34) quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (35) Women received back their dead, raised to life

again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. (36) Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. (37) They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— (38) the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Hebrews 11:32-38 (NIV)

Notice how these individuals, though they were powerful in faith, suffered much. They faced the fury of the flames and the sword. Their children were slaughtered. They were tortured, beaten and bound in prisons. Some were stoned or sawed in two. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that they wandered in deserts and caves dressed in sheep and goat skins. These individuals were unconcerned about money and earthly possessions. They looked for their prize and reward in heaven.

Paul reminds us thirdly, in verse 14, that his prize was in Christ Jesus. We have already seen that it was the desire of Paul to be “in Christ.” The reward Paul speaks about here is for those who are in Christ Jesus. God’s reward is for His children. Only those who have accepted the Lord Jesus and know Him as their Saviour will be rewarded in this way. Paul had experienced the wonderful salvation of God through the Lord Jesus. He then looked forward to the prize that was laid up only for those who come to faith in Christ Jesus and serve Him faithfully.

There is something else we need to mention about the prize Paul speaks of here in verse 14. If we want to win

this prize, we must do so according to the rules God has set out in His Word. Writing to Timothy, the apostle says:

(5) Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. 2 Timothy 2: 6 (NIV)

What happens to athletes who are caught cheating? Are they not disqualified from the prize? Pressing on to receive the prize implies walking in obedience to God's Word. When mistreated, we can develop ungodly attitudes. How easy it is to compromise our faith when faced with trials or opposition. The prize, however, is for those who refuse to compromise. The reward is for those who are faithful to God's Word. We must learn to serve as God requires if we are to receive the prize.

God has called us to live and minister in such a way that we receive the prize He has prepared for us. Are you ready to put in the effort required to win that prize? Will you live in obedience to His standard and compete according to the rules? God delights to reward His servants. He expects that we will also delight in receiving His reward. He waits at the finish line with the prize in hand. Will you complete the race and claim your prize from Him? Running the race set before us will require facing struggles and temptations. It will mean overcoming many obstacles. Don't be discouraged, however. Let the thought of your reward bless and keep you in your trials. Strive to please and honor Him by pressing on to receive the prize.

For Consideration:

- Is it wrong for the believer to seek a reward?
- What do we learn here about the character of God and His desire to reward those who are faithful?
- Does God always reward us in this life? Explain.
- How does the person who strives to obtain his or her reward live? What is the requirement for receiving a reward?
- How does the knowledge of our reward give us courage to face trials on this earth?

For Prayer:

Father God, what a delight it is to know that while You could demand that we serve with no reward or recompense, You have chosen to reward all who faithfully serve You. Forgive us for not seeking to live more for that reward. Help us today to realize that You have called us to run the race to receive the prize. Show us anywhere in our life where we have not been faithful to you. Teach us what it means to live and minister to obtain the prize to which you have called us. May the knowledge of Your desire to reward us give us courage and strength to persevere.

THE MATURE VIEW

(15) All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Philippians 3:15 (NIV)

What is Christian maturity? We have all seen programmes of discipleship based solely on doctrine. The assumption is that if we teach people the truth they will be mature. Doctrines, as important as they are, however, are not the measure of maturity. You can know the truth about God and His ways and still be immature in the faith.

A more legalistic approach measures Christian maturity by lifestyle. The mature person, according to this view, lives his or her life according to a set of rules and traditions. While it is important that we live in obedience to the Word of God, lifestyle is not the measure of true maturity. Churches are filled with believers who do the right things but whose hearts are not right with God.

There was no group so dedicated to living the “godly life” as the Pharisees. These individuals debated doctrine and

lived very strict lives, but they did not know Christ. I am afraid that there are many people like this in the church today. Outwardly they are “good Christians” and seem to do all the right things. They can recite the doctrines of the faith and give chapter and verse to prove their point. Underneath the doctrine and lifestyle however, lies a very shallow relationship with the Lord Jesus. Strip away this exterior and there is nothing left. Paul teaches that maturity in the Christian life has more to do with our relationship with Christ than it does with how well we know a set of doctrines or practice a certain lifestyle.

In verse 15 Paul reminded the Philippians that all who were mature should take the same view of life as he did. He expressed this view in the verses we examined in this study. What is Christian maturity according to Paul? To answer this, let me summarize what we have seen so far.

First, Paul believed that maturity had something to do with priorities in life. In verses 7 and 8 he told the Philippians that he considered everything rubbish compared to knowing Christ Jesus. He was willing to lay everything aside to know Christ and walk in deeper fellowship with Him. There are those who teach that the Christian life is all about blessing and prosperity on this earth. The old message about picking up one’s cross and laying down one’s life seems to be losing ground. Paul taught that everything we gain in life should be seen as rubbish in comparison to knowing Christ. He held nothing so tightly that he could not give it up for the sake of his Lord. Maturity has to do with having the right priorities in life.

Second, mature believers enjoy a certain position with God. Paul taught that mature Christians are found “in Christ” (verse 9). That is to say, they know His acceptance and are covered by His righteousness. They do not trust in

their own efforts or put any weight on their achievements to gain favour with God. They know and accept the righteousness of Christ as their own and trust in that alone to give them a right standing with the Father. They enjoy their standing with God and are learning to walk in the privileges that are now theirs as His children.

Third, mature Christians want to know the resurrection power of Christ. This is the power that brings life to the deadness in their lives and gives victory over sin and its effects. Mature Christians are learning to live in the power of Christ's victory over sin.

Fourth, mature believers share in the fellowship of Christ's suffering. They are not exempt from suffering but know His presence and enabling as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death. They commit themselves to following His example of faithfulness, obedience and hope in the trials and struggles of life.

Finally mature Christians realize they are not perfect but make it their commitment to grow in their relationship with Christ. As mature as Paul was, throughout his life he continued to learn and grow. He made it his commitment to press on, putting aside all that hindered him as he strained toward the goal. Part of Paul's maturity had to do with recognizing his own shortcomings and weaknesses.

We must never confuse maturity with perfection. The only perfect man who ever lived on this earth was Jesus. King David fell into the sin of adultery and murder. His children were rebellious and committed many horrible sins. God described him, however, as a "man after his own heart" (Acts 13:22). Like Paul, David often felt the weight of his sin. When he fell, he confessed his sin, got back on his

feet and continued his pursuit of God. This was counted to him as maturity.

What does maturity look like for the believer? It is more than a set of doctrines or rules. It is a commitment to a person, privilege and process. Mature believers are committed to knowing Christ, experiencing all that is theirs in their new standing with God and are determined to grow in deeper intimacy, knowledge and power as His children.

Of particular significance in this verse are Paul's words, "if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you." It would be quite possible to interpret Paul to mean, "God will prove me right." Paul's focus in these words is not about God proving him right but about God making something clear to His children. Paul is speaking here about maturity in Christ. He understood how important it was to God to see His children grow up and become mature believers. He believed, with all his heart, that God would make that path to maturity clear to His children.

Who among us has not held an infant child in his or her arms and said, "I wish they could be like this forever?" Young babies are wonderful to hold and cuddle in our arms. They are a delight to watch and play with, but no matter how much we delight in our young children, it is our desire to see them grow up and become mature and responsible adults. God has this same desire for His children. His great delight is to watch us move from spiritual infancy to mature adulthood. He wants us to grow in our ability to trust and walk with Him. He wants us to discover the gifts and potential He had placed in each of us. It grieves his heart to see that some of His children do not grow beyond the level of a child in their faith. They are not ready for deeper truths and experiences in Him. The writer

to the Hebrews speaks about this in Hebrews 5 when he writes:

(12) In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! (13) Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. (14) But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Hebrews 5:12-14 (NIV)

Paul reminded the Corinthians that he moved away from childish ways when he became a man and encouraged them to do likewise in their spiritual walk.

(11) When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 1 Corinthians 13:11 (NIV)

Paul was so confident in God's commitment to mature His children that he told the Philippians that God would make the path to maturity clear to them. He assured them that God would bring to completion what he had begun in their lives:

(6) being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6 (NIV)

Listen to what the Lord God said through His servant Isaiah:

(9) Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?" says the LORD. "Do I close up the womb when I bring to delivery?" says your God. Isaiah 66:9 (NIV)

What has God been giving birth to in your life? What has He begun to do in you? What God begins in us He also wants to complete. Notice how the writer to the Hebrews describes the Lord Jesus in Hebrews 12:2:

(2) Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2 (NIV)

Jesus is not only the author of our faith but also the perfecter. In other words, He doesn't just bring us into a relationship with the father, He also develops and matures that relationship. Paul knew that God would not abandon His children. He knew that God would continue to work in their lives and bring them to maturity. He had confidence that God would make the way of maturity clear to His children.

Do you realize that God has invested Himself in you today? His Son has died for you and has brought you into a right standing with Himself. He has accepted you as His child. It is His desire to see you grow up and become mature in Him. Are you ready to let God do His work in you? Will you let Him expose your shortcomings and weaknesses? Will you allow Him to use the circumstances you are facing today to teach you about your need? He wants to complete what He is doing in your life. He is committed to this task. He will not abandon you. He will make His way clear if you are ready to listen and follow Him.

While the trials and suffering of life are often difficult they also serve the purpose of bringing us to greater maturity. Greater maturity brings us into a deeper experience and knowledge of God. Ultimately, this is what we all desire.

For Consideration:

- How does Paul define maturity in Christ? What are some false or incomplete ways of defining Christian maturity?
- What is the difference between maturity and perfection? Do we have to be perfect to be mature?
- Can a mature believer fall into sin? What is the response of the mature believer when he or she falls into sin?
- What do we learn here about God's desire for our maturity?
- What has God been showing you about yourself and your personal shortcomings and weaknesses? What does He want you to do about these things?
- How has God been maturing you these past few years? What has He been using in your life to draw you closer to Himself?

For Prayer:

Father God, I thank you for Your great patience with me as I seek to grow in my walk with You. I ask you to forgive me for falling into the trap of believing that if I have my doctrine and lifestyle right I am mature. I ask you to teach me to love You as Paul did. Bring light where there is darkness. Give me grace to walk with You and to enjoy my inheritance as Your son or daughter. Thank You for Your

commitment to see me mature in my walk with You. I pray that You would make the path to maturity clear in my life. I thank You that I can have the confidence that what You have begun in my, You will complete. Thank You that You can use all that I suffer in this life to bring greater maturity and draw me into a deeper relationship with You.

13

LIVING UP TO WHAT I HAVE ATTAINED

(16) Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Philippians 3:16 (NIV)

What a privilege it is to meet men and women of faith who have allowed God to refine them in the furnace of life. These individuals have experienced God in powerful ways. I think of Daniel in the lion's den or his three friends in the fiery furnace and realize that they have experienced God in ways I have never experienced Him. Those who have gone through the fire of affliction have been stripped of their pride. They have been brought to the end of themselves and the presence of Jesus Christ in them is very powerful.

While trials and testing are designed to strengthen us, there are believers who do not accept what God allows in their lives. These believers do not see that God wants them to learn through the difficult times. They refuse to be shaped by the trials God brings their way. They hold stubbornly to their sinful attitudes. They resist being humbled.

These believers come out the other side hard and bitter. What was designed to strengthen and refine, has actually made them weaker.

In Philippians 3:16 Paul challenged the Philippians to live up to what they had already attained. Victories in the Christian life do not come easy. How easily, however, we give up the victories God has given. Jesus gives an example of this in Matthew 12.

(43) "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. (44) Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. (45) Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation." Matthew 12:43-45 (NIV)

Jesus speaks about a man who has been delivered from the power of an evil spirit. This man, however, does not protect himself from further attacks and so the evil spirit returns with seven others more wicked than itself. The man's final condition is worse than his first. The enemy strips him of his victory and, with the aid of his assistants, takes even more territory.

We see this happening in our day. Whole nations, once impacted powerfully by the gospel, have returned to their former ways. Individual believers, once vibrant witnesses for the Lord Jesus, have fallen and turned their back on Him. There is a battle for the hearts and souls of men and women around this world. Satan will not be content until he has stripped us of every victory God has ever given.

There is a powerful passage in 2 Samuel 23. Here the author speaks about Eleazar, one of David's fighting men.

(9) Next to him was Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one of the three mighty men, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered [at Pas Dammim] for battle. Then the men of Israel retreated, (10) but he stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day. The troops returned to Eleazar, but only to strip the dead. 2 Samuel 23:9-10 (NIV)

When all of David's fighting men withdrew, Eleazar stood alone with his sword in hand to fight off the enemy. Even when his friends abandoned him, Eleazar persevered. Verse 10 tells us that "he stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to his sword." He is a powerful example of what Paul is teaching us here in Philippians 3:16.

Paul challenged the Philippian believers to jealously guard the victories God had given them and to live up to what they had already attained in their walk with the Lord God. This tells us something important about the Christian life. The fact that Paul warns the Philippians about this reminds us that it is possible to slip backwards in our spiritual walk. Have you ever tried to swim up a river with a strong current? It takes all our strength to keep moving forward. The force of the water is against us. If we do not keep moving, we will find ourselves downstream where we began. Living the Christian life can be something like this.

While our salvation can never be taken from us, we can certainly lose spiritual ground. We only have to look

around us to see men and women who have lost their zeal for the Lord or wandered away from the truth of His Word. Some are hardly distinguishable from unbelievers.

Take a moment to consider the victories God has given you in your life. His resurrection power has given life to the deadening effect of sin. Through the circumstances of your life, He has given you victories over sinful attitudes and thoughts. Consider the lessons He has taught you? You have seen His provision in wonderful ways. You have watched Him empower you in service. You have seen Him overcome tremendous obstacles in your life. These are powerful lessons. Why is it, however, that we seem to struggle just as much when we face the same problems again? Why do I seem destined to relearn the same lessons over and over? Why do I need to re-conquer the same territory in my life? Have I truly learned the lessons God has taught me? Have I guarded the progress I have made in my walk with Him or has the enemy stripped me of my victories? Have I become lazy and careless about preserving what God has been doing in me?

Paul knew that the Philippians would be tempted to become slack in their walk with the Lord God. He knew that they would be tempted to compromise or give in. Where I live, I have seen the enemy strip us of our Christian heritage. He has removed prayer and the Bible from our schools. I have watched once vibrant churches turn from the truth of God's Word. I have seen believers question and re-interpret the clear teaching of the Word of God to suit their need.

I remember speaking with an older gentleman in a church I was attending a number of years ago. Speaking about his denomination, he said to me, "Wayne, we used to have a

light on this island but now that light has gone out.” Consider the lands where Paul the apostle preached the gospel. Where are those countries today? Once the missionary sending countries of their day, these countries have now been taken over by other religions. How we need to praise the Lord for the way the gospel is expanding today. The warning of Paul, however, remains. Hold on to what you have attained. History has a way of repeating itself. If we give in, the enemy will penetrate our ranks. He is already doing his utmost to influence the minds and attitudes of the next generation. If we are not careful to guard what God has given, the enemy will strip it away.

Many of the victories we have in the Christian life have come through great struggle and pain. Will we give the territory we have gained through much suffering back to the enemy? Will we allow him to strip away the lessons God has so wonderfully taught? Will we allow him to take the hearts and minds of our children? Will we watch our churches wander from the truth? May God give us the heart of Eleazar. The enemy must have nothing. We will stand our ground to guard what God has been doing in us. We will live up to what we have already attained.

All of this will mean struggle and pain. Eleazar's hand was sore. His muscles cramped and froze around his sword, but he would not let the enemy take what God had given. He would persevere to the end. May this too be our attitude as we face the struggles of this life. May God reward our faithfulness and may we find our ultimate comfort and rest in Him.

For Consideration:

- What lessons has the Lord taught you? Have you really learned these lessons or do you find yourself struggling with the same things over and over again?
- Take a moment to consider the victories the Lord has given you. What do you need to do to guard those victories and continue to walk in them?
- What examples do you see around you of spiritual territory once conquered but now taken back by the enemy?

For Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I thank you for the many victories you have given me in life. I pray that I would not take those victories lightly. I ask that you would give me the spirit of Eleazar who refused to allow the enemy any territory. I ask that you would help me to learn what you have been teaching me. I ask that you would open my eyes to see how the enemy has been trying to strip away my victories. I pray for grace and strength to resist him and to discipline myself to live up to what I have already attained. May I never give up but may I strive always for the prize to which you are calling me heavenward.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

To date tens of thousands of books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books?

For more information about Light To My Path Book Distribution visit our website at <http://ltmp-homepage.blogspot.ca>