

# Joy in Perseverance

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, I'm sure you've probably heard of the Miracle Mile, the race, the Miracle Mile. It was a historic race at the Commonwealth Games in Vancouver, Canada, in 1954, in 1954, when England's Roger Bannister ran the first sub-four-minute mile in an official race.

Roger Bannister, you've probably heard of him. But there was another man who also ran that race with a sub-four-minute mile. I wonder if you know his name. He was an Australian athlete called John Landy.

And in the race, John Landy led the whole way. But with 90 yards to go, he glanced over his left shoulder, and just as he glanced to his left, Roger Bannister ran past on his right and won the race with a record time of 3 minutes 58.8 seconds.

John Landy stopped looking forward and he lost the race. And Roger Bannister went down in athletics history for winning the Miracle Mile.

And it's a great story about keeping focused until the end. And I think it really helps to illustrate what Paul is saying in the second half of his letter to the Philippians in chapter 3.

[ 1 : 1 9 ] Because you'll have noticed in our reading all of the athletic imagery that Paul uses Paul's life as he compares his own life to a race where he presses on in order to win the prize.

Paul is describing his life as a follower of Jesus Christ. Because being a Christian is a bit like running a race where we've got to keep going until we reach our heavenly goal.

You don't just become a Christian and then that's it. You stop. No, your identity in Jesus Christ is always accompanied by the transformation of your life.

So being in Christ means that we continue to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. So following Jesus means pressing on to become like him in the present whilst also keeping focus on being with Christ forever in the future.

And so I'd like us to look at those two points this afternoon. First, press on to become like Christ in the present, verse 12 to 16. And then second, keep focused on being with Christ in the future, verse 17 to 21.

[ 2 : 3 4 ] So first, press on to become like Christ in the present. So we're in a section in Paul's letter to the Philippians where he says that he wants to become like Christ.

And so there's no break in his flow of thought. If you were here last week, the beginning of chapter 3, he's then moving on to what we're thinking about this afternoon. Paul's just said that his ultimate goal in life is to know Christ.

He says he wants to know the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, to become like Christ in his death, and then to be resurrected from the dead. That's what Paul is looking forward to. And so he wants to be more like Jesus Christ. Because being a Christian or being in Christ, as Paul describes it throughout the New Testament, is to become more Christ-like for Paul, but also for each one of us.

But of course, we are not there yet. Nobody is fully like Jesus Christ. Listen to what he says in verse 12. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

[ 3 : 5 2 ] Paul wants to press on with Christ because he is not the finished article, yet he has not graduated to the Christian life. And at this point, it's thought that Paul had been a Christian for around 30 years.

And in the book of Acts, in the New Testament, we read about Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9, when the risen Lord Jesus Christ confronted Paul on the Damascus road, and basically took hold of Paul's life, and made Paul his own, made Paul a follower of Jesus.

And there's a sense in which, if you go back to the race analogy, that was the starter pistol for Paul, the beginning of his race, the beginning of his Christian life.

And so here, Paul writes, and the race is on, and he has started, he hasn't finished, and so this is about how he runs. Because the resurrection and the prize of heaven is still to come in the future. And so for Paul, coming to Jesus is the start of his Christian life, but he must continue in Jesus until he reaches that goal of heaven.

[ 5 : 08 ] And that's what it's like being a Christian. If you are a Christian, then Jesus Christ is your Savior. He has justified you. He has justified us.

But Jesus Christ is also your Lord. And so Jesus is transforming you. He's transforming us, if we are his people, into what he wants us to be, which is to be more like him.

And so what Paul is talking about here in Philippians is what we often give the name sanctification to, being sanctified, being made more holy, becoming more Christ-like.

And it's a process. It's a process of growing. It's a process of maturing to become what Jesus Christ has saved us to be. And so it requires grace-driven effort.

It requires dedication and determination. And that's why Paul is using this athletic language here in his letter. Did you notice that twice he says, I press on.

[ 6 : 12 ] There in verse 12, I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Then again in verse 14, I press on towards the goal to win the prize.

Now last weekend was the Glasgow half marathon, which gave people plenty opportunity to take photos of themselves and post them on social media. But you know, living the Christian life is like a marathon.

It is more like a marathon than it is like a sprint. And so we have to keep going, being transformed, until we reach our life's end.

And so whether you have been a Christian for say six months, or for six years, or for 60 years, you have got to press on. The race isn't finished yet.

You have got to keep going. But of course, not in your own strength, by yourself. Because Paul says here, he keeps going because Christ Jesus took hold of me.

[ 7 : 16 ] And so Jesus has brought us to himself. He's given us new life. He's promised a prize at the end. And he is with us all the way until we get there.

And so how should we run? Well, if you notice in this passage, Paul has got a training plan. And it's got two core elements to it there in verse 13.

He says, Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead.

So the two elements are forgetting what is behind, firstly, and then secondly, straining towards what is ahead. So Paul, like a focused runner, he forgets what is behind.

What does he mean, forget what is behind? Well, does he mean just delete any memories from your mind of your past life before you became a Christian, before you were converted to Jesus Christ?

[ 8 : 18 ] Well, clearly he doesn't mean that because he has just recounted his own past in chapter 3, verse 4 to 6. But he forgets what is behind in the sense that his achievements, all he's done, none of that counts towards his salvation.

And so he can't take pride in his religious pedigree or his religious performance. He forgets it as being of any worth. And yet it's not just the religion that Paul should forget.

Because Paul can't keep looking back to everything he's accomplished as a missionary either. He can't take pride in all of those achievements.

Remember, Paul had evangelized unbelievers, he had planted churches, he had disciplined believers. But there's no sense in which Paul thinks that he's done enough, that he's come far enough, and so now he can ease up in his role.

He can't hang up his running shoes, as it were. He can't bask in the glory of all his past successes, good as they are. And so he forgets what is behind, not to be distracted so that he can press on to what is to come.

[ 9 : 40 ] He can't look back to past successes in his Christian life. And none of us can look back to our past successes, although sometimes we might be tempted to do so.

Maybe it's the Christian camps that we've led. Maybe it's the theological degrees that we've got. Maybe it's teaching Sunday school for years, even decades.

Maybe it's being a full-time Christian worker, a minister, a church planter, or a missionary. And of course, we should rejoice in everything that God has used us for, but we shouldn't think that we can somehow ease up.

And be satisfied with what has been done in the past. Forget what is behind. But it might not just be past successes we need to forget.

It might also be past sins that we need to forget. Just like in Paul's own life. Remember how Paul, before he was a follower of Jesus, he approved of Stephen's execution in Acts.

[10:46] And he was also the man who tried to destroy the church. And yet the good news of Jesus is that all of our past sin, all of our guilt, all of our shame can be forgiven.

And it's wonderful. And so, Paul's saying here, when you forget what is behind, don't let that past sin and what you have done, don't let that cripple you from moving forwards in the race.

To press on to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ took hold of you. It's hard to move forwards, isn't it, if you keep looking backwards. If you try that in a running race, then you only disable yourself.

And so Paul's saying you can't do that in the Christian life, which is also a race. And so Paul here is using his effort to run flat out for Christ because he has not arrived yet.

And so that's the first element of his training plan. But there's a second element. And that's not just forgetting what is behind, but secondly, he is straining towards what is ahead.

[11:59] He says in verse 14, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. And so the image he uses here is of an athlete straining towards the finish line, eyes on the prize.

And Paul's saying that he is pressing on to win the prize. Well, what is the prize? He says the prize is the heavenward call of God in Christ Jesus.

So just as the prize would be awarded to winners at the Greek games for their competition, so he's saying God gives the prize of salvation to all of those that he has called to be his people.

And that's why we preserve towards the goal of glory. It's the prize that's in store for everybody who follows Jesus Christ. God is calling his people heavenwards, moving us forwards until the day when Jesus Christ returns and then takes us to be with him forever.

And we're not there yet. And the good news is that the God who made us and who loves us wants to dwell with us forever. With people like you and me, God wants us to be with him forevermore.

[13:22] That's why we were made. And so it's only when we've got this perspective on life that we will press on to become more like Jesus because one day we'll be with him.

And so when we know what God is calling us to in the then and there, it gives us a focus in the here and now, doesn't it? About how we should live.

Because when we realize what will happen in the then and there, it will change how we live lives in the here and now. Just look what Paul says verse 15 and 16. All of us then 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. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. So Paul's urging the Philippians to think in this way.

He's saying if you're mature, then you'll recognize that you need to press on with determination.

And isn't that how we ought to see our lives as followers of Jesus?

[14:31] That we have still got a long way to go. Like Paul said earlier in his letter, chapter 1, verse 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.

And so we are not the finished article. Nobody is as a Christian believer. We are still this work in progress as God calls us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

And so he's saying it really is immature to think I'm fine as I am. I'm fine where I am. I'm okay.

I don't need to press on. I'm quite comfortable with where I'm at as a believer. But I don't need to do anything to learn anything to change anything in my life to stop anything or work on anything.

Paul's saying that is an immature attitude to living the Christian life. In the same way a runner when he has started on the race doesn't get to halfway and say oh that'll do.

[15:40] Yesterday I did the park run at Drum Chapel one of the hardest park runs in the whole UK to do because it's just uphill three times same hill but you go around and you go up at three times and it's hard work but nobody stopped halfway through and said that's fine that'll do.

And yet so many people think in the Christian life that you can get so far you can do so much and then you can ease up. Paul's saying press on become more like Jesus each and every step of the way and he says in verse 16 live up to what you have already attained.

And so how do we practically apply this to our lives then? Well he does say all of us then who are mature should take such a view of things. And so the longer we run in the Christian life then the more transformation into the likeness of Jesus there should be.

Because the Holy Spirit is in our hearts dwelling in our lives then he sensitizes us to our sin and makes us increasingly conscious of the work that still needs to be done in our hearts and in our lives so that we become more like Jesus Christ.

And so if we continue with Paul's athletic imagery here then we should monitor how we're running each day. People are so keen to monitor their running on Strava the app to see how far they've come what their pace has been what the incline has been like and isn't that how we should think of our Christian lives?

[ 17 : 27 ] Is there any progress? Am I further on today than I was last week? What is my pace like? Am I pressing on? Am I straining towards what is ahead?

Or do I keep looking back to what I once was? To what I once did? Have I maybe even slowed down? Or stopped?

Or worse going backwards in the Christian life? Because what Paul's saying here is basically we should be more like Jesus with each passing day as God is calling us heavenwards.

And so that's the first thing press on to become like Christ in the present. And the second is keep focused on being with Christ in the future. So how do we keep focused?

Well Paul tells the Philippians to follow good examples and to avoid bad examples. So first follow good examples. Verse 17 join together in following my example brothers and sisters and just as you have us as a model keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

[ 18 : 40 ] Now Paul's not being arrogant here. It would be odd if we said just follow my example. If you want to know how to do it look at me I've cracked it I've sorted it then you'll see.

But he's not being arrogant here. The point of his whole letter is to point the Philippians to Jesus Christ urging them to have the same mind the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

And it's been clear from Paul's words and his life that Paul also has this mindset. And so he's saying to the Philippians that they are to follow Paul as he follows Christ.

They are to imitate Paul's Christ-like example. His words and his ways are to be imitated. Because there's a sense in which God's people should be illustrations or should be picture displays of what it means to be a Christian.

Of course we're not perfect illustrations of following Jesus but Paul's saying we ought to be good illustrations of what it means to follow Jesus.

[ 19 : 53 ] Because our union with Christ should be conforming us into the image of Christ. God works in his people by his spirit to make us more like Jesus.

That's his goal, his purpose, that in our life until we get to him, he is transforming us to become more like Jesus.

Where the pattern of Christ's life is reproduced in our own. And that's why Paul urges the Philippians to follow his example and others who live like him.

And he's already mentioned those. Remember Timothy and Epaphroditus in chapter 2. And so the Philippians could better follow Paul's teaching not just by hearing it, not just by reading it in his letter, but by seeing it played out in his life, how he lived.

It would help them if they had a real flesh and blood example in the Apostle Paul and in Timothy and in Epaphroditus to see what it means to follow Jesus, what it looks like.

[ 21 : 03 ] Because you know the Christian life is caught as well as it is taught. In other words, we are better helped to understand what it means to follow Jesus.

We're better helped to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ when we see it lived out in somebody else's life who follows him. And that's why being committed to a local church where we hear the preaching and the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and we can see it lived out in different people's lives of all ages and from all kinds of backgrounds.

Because as we watch real people live real lives, facing real challenges, with real problems, in full view of one another, we're helped to see just what it means to follow Jesus as we follow Jesus together.

And it helps people to come in to see not only that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, but it's powerful because it is transforming that person's life and that person's life and that person's life. God is working to shape them and mold them and make them more like Jesus Christ. And that's why Paul's telling us to look around for good examples to follow, whether it's him or other people. [ 22 : 27 ] Or to put it another way, he's saying just watch how other people run the race. Watch that runner, watch that athlete, look at their training schedule, look at their program, see what they do, come alongside them and watch them and observe them and then you try and do the same.

Sure, it's going to help you. Just think about that in the church. If we were to run alongside somebody for a stretch and learn from them, to follow them because they follow Jesus and to only follow them in so far as they do follow Jesus, if they stop following Jesus, don't follow them anymore.

But think, what would that look like? Well, listen to them pray in the prayer meeting or discover how they study the Bible. How do they engage with God on their own?

Watch how they share their faith and learn from them. See how they speak to people and relate to people. See how they treat people. Sit with them by their bedside as they suffer and hear from them how their faith in God helps them in what they go through.

Notice them, how they serve. Watch them in church, taking the bins out, making the tea, the coffee, cleaning the toilets. Look at them, see how they do it, their attitude when they do it.

[ 23 : 54 ] Watch them as they raise their children at home. See how they practice hospitality and feed people in their home or treat people well.

See how they give their time, their talents, their treasures. Because as they model what it means to follow Jesus in all life, their example will be a good one for us to emulate, for us to follow.

And so look for good examples in Christ Church Glasgow to follow. But also be asking yourself, am I a good example worth following?

Can others watch me? Can others watch my life, whether at church or at home, and just figure out what it means to follow Jesus Christ?

As they look at me, will they be helped to be drawn closer to God through Jesus? Am I a good model for others to follow? Because not all examples are good examples to follow, and that's what Paul is saying to the Philippians.

[ 24 : 58 ] He makes it clear. So he's saying you don't just need to follow good examples, he says secondly you need to avoid bad examples, and he gives them in verse 18 and 19.

So Paul's warning here against the dangerous people.

Who are they? Well it's hard to know exactly. They're not the people who undermined Paul that he speaks about in chapter 1. They could have been the Judaizers, the circumcision party.

He mentioned last time in chapter 3. But whoever these people are, Paul is speaking with tears because he says they're enemies of the cross of Christ.

He's saying don't look at them, don't look at their lives, don't follow them because they're breaking my heart. They're professing to follow Jesus but they don't.

[ 26 : 00 ] They're in fact modeling a lifestyle that is the opposite opposite of what following Jesus looks like. And so even if they did claim to be Christians, Paul's saying they aren't living in a Christ-like way.

They're bad examples for you to see. And Paul says their destiny is destruction. So you're running a race and there's a prize at the end.

For these guys, they're running a race. There's no prize. Destruction. Nothing. And so they might be around the church just as they were around the church in Philippi.

They might say some things that sound right or sound good. But Paul says check their lifestyle.

That will give them away because they are heading for eternal destruction.

Why? Well he says their God is their stomach. In the narrowest sense that could mean that they're gluttons. They like eating. But the word can also have a broader meaning for appetites.

[ 27 : 08 ] And so he's suggesting that they were ruled by their sensual appetites. And they would do anything to satisfy them. So their motto was if it feels good, do it.

That's why he says their glory is in their shame. And so they celebrated those things that they ought to have been ashamed of. They were proud of their lifestyles.

They regarded their sinful behavior as good. Presumably they believed that God approved of their lifestyles.

If it feels good then why shouldn't we stop ourselves from doing what we feel we should do following our desires.

others. And so Paul says their mind is set on earthly things. No thought for God. They just think about life in this world with no regard for the future and what is to come.

[ 28 : 07 ] Now of course Paul is addressing a specific group of people here but what he says also has a clear application for our own age and even for the church in our own society.

Because we don't just see this lifestyle in the world around us out there. Of course we see it out there. But we also sadly see this lifestyle in the established churches of our land in the UK where people might profess to be a Christian but they celebrate their sinful behavior which is opposed to what God says is the best way for us to live.

And they follow their natural desires. in order to satisfy their sensual appetites. Believing that well it would feel unnatural for me not to act on these urges.

And so surely God must approve of what I do because surely God wants me to be happy. And so even some within the church can try to justify the sin that God's word condemns.

And it is so dangerous. That's what Paul is warning here. Because Paul's verdict on those who are ruled by their appetites and who glory in their shame is that their destiny is destruction.

[ 29 : 29 ] And so he's urging the Philippians, follow the example of those who follow Jesus. If people who claim to be followers of Jesus but live a lifestyle that is antithetical or different from how Jesus lived, then you shouldn't be following them.

He says you have to have your mind set on heaven, not on earth. That's what he says in verse 20 and 21, but our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

So he's reminding the Philippians of who they are in Christ. They are citizens of heaven. And remember, citizenship was a big deal in Philippi because Philippi was a Roman company, which meant that the citizens of Philippi were also citizens of Rome.

They had special status. They had the same rights and same privileges as Roman citizens. And Paul's saying here, every believer is a citizen of heaven.

He's saying that is where your home is. Not in this world, but in heaven. Even right now, that's where you belong and that's where you are going and that is where you will be.

[ 31 : 00 ] And so he's saying that means your lives right now need to have this flavor of heaven as you live them. as you live out your heavenly citizenship in this world, you should look like people who are different from people in this world.

It's often said that you can be too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. I've never met anyone who is too heavenly minded. They're not out there.

Nobody is. But citizens of heaven should be heavenly minded because when they are, they are the best citizens on this earth.

Why? Because they're most like Jesus. And that's the heavenly focus that we've got to have. Since Paul says we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ coming back from heaven. And so one day Paul is saying Jesus will come and he will bring everything under his control. He will put everything right. And Paul says Jesus will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

[ 32 : 15 ] And so right now our bodies are subject to decay and death. It's obvious, isn't it? I conducted a funeral in this past week. We die.

We get old. We lose our hair. Our backs go out more times than we do as we get older. The point is we decay and we die.

We are mortal. Our bodies perish. But Paul is saying when Jesus returns he will transform your body to be like his glorious body and it will be imperishable.

It will be immortal. It will be eternal and it will be glorious. The body you dream for, the body you work hard to get is coming.

Even better that you can ever imagine or work for. And Paul is saying that's the future. That's the finishing line that is coming up ahead. That's the goal.

[ 33 : 13 ] That's the prize. It's to be in Christ in this life and look forward to the day when you will be with Christ in perfection.

The life you've always dreamed of is coming. He's saying there will be this glorious resurrection and you will have a resurrection body that will fit you for heaven.

How long is heaven? Heaven's eternal. So it's a body that will not give up the ghost. It will keep going forever. And so he's saying to the Philippians and to us to encourage us, this is the reality of what is coming in the future.

And if you know that, then it should change how you live now, shouldn't it? Because our salvation means that we are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus in this world.

Why? Why are we being transformed? Why do we need to be transformed in this world? Well, because one day we will have a body, a glorious body to live in the world that is to come.

[ 34 : 21 ] And that's what it means to be a Christian. It means to receive a heavenly birth, a new birth in Jesus, which then makes us a heavenly citizen, so that we then live a heavenly life in this world until Jesus comes again and then we go to be with him in heaven forever.

And until then, we're to be conformed to the image of Christ now. And so if you're here this afternoon and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, perhaps you're curious about what all of this is about, well I would encourage you, get in the race, get started.

Don't wait down the line because you may die before you get a chance to get in the race. Join the race now, follow Jesus, you'll be united to him immediately when you trust in him and then he will take you to heaven.

God is calling you heavenwards when you're his child and he will get you there. You've got to be in it to win it, haven't you?

That's what they say about races. It's the same in the Christian life. To be with God forever, you've got to start that in this world. By letting Jesus take hold of your life, forgiving all of your past and taking a grip of you now and taking you to be with him forever.

[ 35 : 55 ] Jesus works to transform our lives. Whatever state we're in before we know him, he changes us to make us more like him.

God wants to do all of this for you. He wants to do all of this for every single one of us. Where our union with Jesus Christ now transforms us so that we're ready to be with Christ when he returns.

And so if you're a believer, press on. Press on and keep focused. If you aren't, join the race. Jesus welcomes you to come and meet him, to know him and to be with him forever.

Let's pray.