

Prayer

Jesus Christ, have mercy on us, for we know our sins and we long to be free of them. Our failures overwhelm us and we struggle for liberation, and the enemy attacks us and we do not understand how he assails us. Now, in Your mercy, envelop us in Your love, empower us by Your Holy Spirit, and lift us up above all strife to stand victorious with You, confident in the glorious hope of eternal life! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

When you pray today, make sure that you spend as long praising God as you do praying about your own needs.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for young people in church** *Pray for those who are responsible for working with the young people in your church*
- *Pray about the political concerns for Iran and its nuclear programme*
- *Praise the Lord for the love of friends and family*

Meditation

What we know and experience of You, Lord Jesus,
Is consistent with all you have done for our forebears:

You judge the world in which we live
by the same standards You have always used;

You renew Your Church in our own day,
just as You have done throughout the centuries;

You raise up great leaders in our midst,
and use them as you did the 'Greats' of old;

You call us to press on to the highest goals,
at all times trusting in Your strength and guidance;

You trust us as witnesses to Your Gospel,
and commission us to pass on our heritage of Faith.

We hold all You have given us as precious, Lord Jesus;
It is not ours to possess but our duty to pass on.

Bible passage - Philippians 3:12-16

¹² Not that I have already grasped or achieved this; but I pursue it in order to reach it for myself, as Christ Jesus has taken hold of me. ¹³ Friends, I do not think I have achieved this for myself; but I certainly do this: forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead, ¹⁴ I keep pressing on toward the goal of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ All of us who are mature should bear this in mind; and if you think otherwise, God will reveal this to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live in a way that is consistent with our claims.

Bible Study

Review

After the superb and stirring words which come just before this (3:7-11), our text today is mysterious, with its talk of grasping at goals (3:12), 'maturity' and 'claims' (3:15,16). Within all this, however, are the much loved verses: *'forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead, I keep pressing on toward the goal of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus.'* (3:13b,14) These are magnificent words of encouragement that can be applied to anyone of faith in any circumstances. Paul wrote this as part of his personal testimony (3:4 onwards), and millions have benefited from their stirring call to trust in the Lord at times of trouble, by focussing on the supreme reward our Lord has for us in the future. Nothing can take away from the value of this, but we will greatly benefit from developing a greater understanding of the passage, and getting to know how it fits into Paul's testimony. There is certainly much to be discovered within these powerful words.

Looking closely at the text, however, what exactly was Paul talking about? It is certainly about how to reach certain 'goals', and Paul speaks of trying but not managing to grasp them except in Christ (3:12,13). When he eventually says what the goal is, we are not necessarily the wiser, for what exactly is *'the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus'*? If we were to ask a group of Christians to suggest what this meant, then we might obtain a wide variety of replies! The secret of understanding this passage is to look back and see that Paul had just finished speaking of *'attaining the resurrection of the dead'* (3:11). There is no mistake then, Paul is speaking about the goal of eternal life with God which is found through the resurrection from the dead. This is the highest of all prizes and is only possible through what Jesus Christ has done for us (3:9). Any form of faith which sits lightly to the resurrection from the dead and Jesus' unique bodily resurrection is not at the heart of Christian faith, because without victory over death and eternal life, the Gospel does not achieve the express intention of God to break down the barriers between earth and heaven!

However, there is a tension therefore within this text which is typical of the whole of the New Testament, and indeed of the faith we profess. On the one hand, we have already been gloriously 'saved' and given God's Holy Spirit; it is the unique starting point for the faith of all Christians. On the other hand, whilst we live in our imperfect world and subject to our human frailties, this is something yet to be completed; or as Paul would say, we are still 'running the race'. Paul does not mention a 'race' here in this text (as he does elsewhere in his writings – see 2 Timothy 4:7) but the picture of an athlete straining ahead in a race would suggest that he had this in mind (3:13). Only at death or the coming of our Lord will we reach the completion of our life's race, and between now and then, we have to put every effort into 'pursuing the goal' and living in Christian maturity (3:15,16). There are many passages of the New Testament which speak in this same way, and tell us about how we get from 'A' to 'B'; where 'A' is our faith in Christ now, and 'B' is our destiny to be with God in Christ (e.g. see 2 Peter 1:5-7). They all speak of the effort, persistence and strength required, and the help God grants us by His Spirit.

Paul tells us in this passage that we will not reach our goal without effort (3:12,15), without being taken there by Christ (3:12,13), or without holding on to the highest possible standards of Christian morality and faith (3:15,16). If this is true, then our path towards eternal life will indeed be 'upward' (3:14).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Perfection
- Forgetting
- A clever trick

Going Deeper

Paul said all this to speak against false teaching at Philippi (3:1-6) and to prevent the Philippian church from going 'downwards', so he spoke to them stirringly with words which reflected the deepest truths of our faith in Christ. By doing this he set us an example not just of how to achieve the goal of eternal life for ourselves, but how to help others in Christ. There is much for us to learn from Paul here.

Perfection

Within this great passage of scripture, Paul frequently uses a word that causes confusion, particularly because of the way in which it can be misunderstood. It is the word 'perfect'; the Greek, 'teleos'. If I were to translate verse 12 strictly it would read 'not that I have already grasped or already been perfected ...', and verse 15 would 'as many of you therefore who are perfect ...'. The problem we have is that on the one hand, Paul talks to fellow Christians to tell them that they cannot reach perfection (3:12) except through the help of Christ and only at the end of the race (3:14); then, in verse 15 he addresses his fellow Christians as 'perfect'! To add to our perplexity, at different times in the life of the church, the 'doctrine of Christian perfection' has been put forward and often caused a great deal of confusion.

What are we to make of this talk of being 'perfect'? Two things must be explained if we are to understand this. The first is a little more detail about what Paul meant by 'goals' in this passage, and secondly, a closer

look at the meaning of the Greek word 'teleos'. When put together, you may then understand why I have translated the passage as I have, and be a little less worried about what the Bible means when it talks of what is 'perfect'.

In the first part of his testimony, Paul testified that when a Jew, he thought of himself as 'blameless' (3:6 – in Greek; 'amemptos') because he literally kept every Pharisaic law developed from the laws of Moses. Not many Pharisees could say this, but in those days, some did, and maybe in all honesty, and they believed that through being blameless like this, then they were 'righteous' before God, and would therefore be gloriously restored to Him. This word 'blameless' also meant 'faultless' which is exactly what we mean today when we say 'perfect'; we might say that something is perfect because it has no faults, for example.

This is the kind of perfection that Paul put in a bundle and threw away in favour of Christ (3:7,8)! However, Paul exchanges that Jewish idea of perfection, with a new one based on Christ. The new 'supreme' goal, as we have already seen in the passages for yesterday and today, is the 'resurrection of the dead'. This is promised to us now through faith and we will attain it in glory (3:14). What Paul does to signify this change of ultimate goal is to use a new Greek word 'teleos' instead of 'amemptos'. This word does not mean anything like blameless or faultless, as 'amemptos' did, its basic meaning is 'something that is finished' and it is a loose word which can therefore mean a great many things. A child who has finished growing up is an adult, for example, so the word 'teleos' can mean 'maturity; and when the world comes to an end, that is also 'teleos', because the world as we know it will have 'finished! You can see how flexible the word is, and Paul mostly uses it in this passage to talk about the Christian goal of eternal life, for which he and all Christians strive. This also explains why I have not used the word 'perfect' in my translation, where you will find it in some others.

The Greek word 'teleos' also lies behind the doctrine of 'Christian perfection', as originally preached by John Wesley. It is a complicated subject, but we should be careful not to talk about this ignorantly. John Wesley knew his Greek, and attempted to tell his followers (the early 'Methodists') that it was possible for us to be 'perfect' in the sense of being 'completely motivated by love'. He knew full well that despite the best of intentions, life rarely works out according to motives of such purity, but he preached this because he saw too many people making no attempt whatsoever to improve themselves and begged them to aim higher. It was a doctrine which came out of street preaching rather than polite preaching in middle-class suburbia, and many people at the bottom of the social 'pile' found Wesley's preaching profoundly liberating, and many thousands were saved. We cannot argue with that!

Forgetting

As we move from verse 12 to verse 13, Paul identified the two pillars of faith. Firstly, the fact that none of us can reach the goal of peace and eternal life with God unless, in Paul's words 'Christ Jesus has taken hold of me'; this is the 'divine initiative' of God's work in Christ by which we are saved, and for which we cannot strive, perform or work. The second pillar comes in verse 13, which is Paul's description of the life and purpose of a true disciple; one who strives with every part of their being to keep going, even under the stress of suffering (3:10) actively responding to the work of God in their own lives until the end, when the race is won.

We may have all heard sermons on this famous passage, but there is one important word in verse 13; it is the word 'forget', as in 'forgetting what is behind and straining forward ...' It is a word that should not be forgotten (!) because it has a great deal of importance. It is easy to say that following Paul's example we should 'bundle up the past and throw it away' (3:8) as if we must wipe the past from our minds, and the remembrance of everything that was not of Christ. That is certainly what it appears to say. However, if we examine this scripture carefully, it does not. Paul certainly did remember his past, otherwise he would not have been able to use it in his testimony as a means of getting at the Judaising opponents in Philippi! No, for Paul, forgetting means something else more important than the (probably) futile attempts we may make to wipe things from our minds.

In biblical thought, the idea of 'remembrance' is to call something to mind in order to do something about it; such as when God 'remembered the people of Israel in Egypt (Ex 2:24). The idea of 'forgetting' is the opposite, and is more like the idea of putting something to one side because you are not going to do anything about it. In other words, it is a purposeful decision. You may know what it is like to decide there is nothing you can do about a problem at present, so you will 'forget' about it until you are able to; and this gives you peace of mind. This is what is meant in verse 13. We can of ourselves do nothing about our past, or sometimes even the mistakes we make, and their consequences sometimes never leave us. However, real liberation comes when we find that in Christ we can place all these things to one side and allow Christ to take care of them. By such forgetfulness, we are liberated!

A clever trick

It is probable that Paul's opponents at Philippi were Jews who had found faith in Christ and joined the church, but could not leave behind (forget!) their past, and still claimed the kind of blameless perfection with respect to the laws of Moses that Paul had, but so roundly rejected in Philippians 3. For a start, they claimed they were all circumcised, as Moses commanded!

In verse 15, it is possible that Paul was speaking 'tongue in cheek' directly to his accusers at Philippi, whom he addressed as those who thought they were 'perfect' or completely 'mature' in faith. The unusual terse Greek words of this sentence are testimony to the probability that Paul was speaking in some 'common' or coded way. If you accept my suggestion, then verse 15 makes more sense, for Paul chides his opponents to 'bear this in mind', and goes on to say that God will Himself reveal everything, and he challenges his readers to live up to their claims.

It is certainly hard to make sense of these verses unless you read them in this way. Of course a Christian should be mature; of course, the Lord will reveal what He will, and of course, all Christians should live up to their calling. These are important messages, but if we read this with care, as I have indicated, then they are not the centre piece of some new thing Paul is saying. They are part of his argument with false teachers, who need to learn to go back to the basics of the Gospel if they wish to be part of God's church.

Application

Each of us will have different opinions about the wisdom of John Wesley's use of the word 'perfection' when preaching to encourage people to strive for higher standards in this life. We cannot argue with Paul for telling about the great goal for all our striving, which is eternal life with Christ and with God. I recall talking about this to a minister when I was a teenager, and being told that this was all far too 'pie in the sky' (their words, not mine) for a young person to be concerned about. I felt cheated, because I wanted to have the highest goals to aim for, and here was a Christian minister telling me not to bother with it.

Now, this does not worry me, and I am more concerned for the life of that minister who has now lost his faith and left the church. This may be an extreme, but I have found that many Christian people do not like too much talk about what happens to us after death, and I also recall a man walking out of a sermon preached by my father in which he began to speak of this. Paul reminds us in this passage that our greatest glory lies in the future beyond the grave, and the church will be blessed when its people can rejoice in this glorious fact.

Yet this passage does not just glory in the goal, but the achieving of it, which is done in this life. We can indeed make choices and respond to the work of God; we can forget and leave in His hands the things we cannot deal with, and then be at peace to deal with the things before us to do. It sounds simple enough, but this straightforward advice about Christian living comes from this great passage of scripture, and it is advice well worth heeding. Not only does it help us live authentic Christian lives, but it keeps at bay the influence of those who seek to divert us today with skilful but devious teaching which points us anywhere except Christ. I will expand this thought later, but not now, for it is best to let this passage leave us with the thought of striving onwards to the 'upwards' goal, that is, the highest goal, of fellowship with God in Christ.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Are you conscious of 'striving for Jesus Christ' in your everyday life? How is this possible for you to do this?
2. Make a list of things that you need to 'forget' as described in this study. Share some of these with others, if it is helpful.
3. Where can you find the real opponents of the Gospel of Christ? Inside the church or outside of it? Debate!

Personal comments by author

I often ask myself whether I have the right aims and objectives in this life, let alone the next. Paul talks so eloquently of being guided in this life by our aspirations for the next, it can be hard to put flesh on what this might mean. However, if we genuinely face in a God-ward direction and aim for what the Lord would have us do, then we will find that everything will begin to make sense, and we will find earthly goals will begin to be revealed by God's grace.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Many Christians feel that at times, their lives are almost 'on hold' as far as 'church' goes, because life at home or work is too busy and 'spiritual things' are left to one side. If this is a description of you, then please read over this passage several times to let it inspire you. Listen for what the Lord says.*
 - *Discuss with a friend or family member what your own aims and objective are in life. Ask the Lord for His help in prayer, and seek to work to those godly aims and objectives*
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Final Prayer

You, Lord Jesus Christ, are the Master of all life

You, O Holy Spirit, are the energy for all life

You, Almighty God, are the provider of all life

Glory be to You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN
