

I invite you to open your Bibles to this morning's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Philippians, Chapter 3 verses 12-21. This can be found on page 830 in your pew Bibles. We continue in "The Joy of Unity" series. Scripture reveals the Joyful Focus of Christians.

## Our Fathers Word

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. 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, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

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. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. 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.

The Word of God for the people of God

Some time ago, the late Billy Graham was invited to speak at a luncheon in North Carolina. A quote from Billy Graham, who passed away in February of this year. *"I'm reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who has been honored by Time Magazine as the Man of the Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached into his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached into his trouser pockets. It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He still couldn't find it.*

*The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it." Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one." Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I am going?" (pause)*

Billy Graham continued. *"See the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand-new suit. My family has been telling me I've gotten a little slovenly in my old age. I used to be more fastidious. So, I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and one more occasion. You know what **that** occasion is? This is the suit in which I'll be buried.*

*But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to remember the suit I'm wearing. What I want you to remember is this: I not only know who I am...but I also know where I am going."*

To know *where* we are going. Shouldn't *that* be our focus? What is our life goal? What *is* our final destiny, *that* which should be so *joyfully focused* upon? If you have confirmed your identity through following and living in Christ Jesus, then the answer should easily come to mind. To spend eternity in heaven with our Heavenly Father.

Perhaps the greatest blessing of being a Christ follower is having the assurance of eternal life. As the apostle Paul is reminding us here in today's scripture text, **this** is our joyful focus. I believe I can confidently say that the mortality rate among humans is a solid 100%. Every single one of us, at some point, will pass from this life into eternity. The Bible says our flesh life is like a vapor.

If a rope *representing our existence* were stretched across the Pacific Ocean from California to Japan, our time on earth would account for only the first millimeter of that rope. The rest would represent eternity. In other words, the vast majority of our existence won't be spent here on earth. It will be spent in eternity. So, it behooves us to have some answers about what will happen in eternity.

Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for us in heaven, *this* is one of the blessings of being a Christ follower. Jesus told us (John 14:6), **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** So, Jesus is preparing a place in heaven, and He's the way to get there.

Jesus also said, **"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."** (John 3:36)

In other words, *believing* in Christ is the *key* to secure our place in heaven. The most well-known verse in the Bible is John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Because of God’s great love for every human being, he sent his Son—Jesus Christ—on a rescue mission. Jesus lived a sinless life. Therefore, he could die in our place to pay the penalty for our sin. Our eternal Lord Jesus took upon himself the eternal punishment we deserved so we would not have to live eternally separated from God.

But to receive this gift of God’s grace, in other words, to reserve our place in heaven, we have to *believe* in what Christ did for us. Hebrews 11:6 says, “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.” The Bible makes it very clear that by placing our faith in the finished work of Christ, we become children of God (John 1:12), our name is written in the book of life (Revelation 20:15) and we’re given the gift of the Holy Spirit as a deposit to guarantee our future place in heaven (Ephesians 1:14).

So, our joyful focus is where we end up in eternity. The late Billy Graham knew where he was going. He was totally confident of his place reserved in heaven. Dr. Graham based his confidence on the finished work of Christ, which he personally received by faith, and then preached to millions.

This is also part of Paul’s focus in today’s passage in Philippians. This is the fifth message in our journey through this amazing New Testament letter. We’ve called this series “Joy of Unity,” because over and over again, *joy* bubbles up through being united in Christ.

No other truth inspires more joy for Christ-followers than heaven! I can't wait to be with the Lord in a place that has no more tears, no more sickness, no more pain, no more sorrow, and no more disappointment! Amen?!

In this passage Paul refers to this joyful focus at least seven times. Let's look at each one briefly.

The first reference to our joyful focus is in verse 12: "Not that I have already obtained this, or have already been made perfect..." This refers back to the previous verse when Paul mentions his desire to know Christ and to attain "the resurrection from the dead." Obviously Paul has not yet been resurrected from the dead. He's still in process. He's still looking forward to the final consummation of his salvation.

The Bible speaks about salvation on three different levels: past, present and future. Back in the early 70's I became a Christ follower. That happened in the past. That was the time when I embraced Jesus as my Lord. I was forgiven and my name was written in the book of life. Theologically this is called regeneration.

But since that time, for the past decades, God's work has continued in me. He's been cleaning me up step by step. This is the present ongoing work of salvation. Theologically, this is referred to as sanctification.

There will come a day, however, when I will become perfect...like Christ. 1 John 3:2. "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as his is." This is the final step in the salvation process. It's when God makes us perfect like Jesus so we're fit for heaven. This final step is theologically known as glorification.

A second reference to our joyful focus is also found in verse 12. Notice the final phrase: “I press on to take hold of *that* for which Christ Jesus *took hold of me*.” Why did Christ take hold of us? Why did he leave heaven, come to earth and die on the cross? Jesus did all that to make us perfect like himself and take us to heaven! In John 14:3 Jesus says, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and *take you to be with me* that you also may *be where I am*.” Jesus wants to *take us with him* in heaven! How amazing is that?

A third reference to our joyful focus is in the final phrase in verse 13: “*straining toward what is ahead*.” Paul is looking ahead to the finish line. He knows one day he’ll be made like Christ. Until then, he’s straining ahead in that direction. He’s focused on crossing the final tape in the race of life. ***This*** is the consummation of our salvation; our *joyful focus*; the blessing and joy of being in God’s presence.

A fourth reference to our joyful focus is in verse 14: “I *press on* toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Paul uses the imagery of a track race. But the prize, in this case, is the most precious gift we could ever receive: the gift of sharing eternity with Christ.

People all around us are pressing on toward the wrong things: more money, more pleasure, more toys, more trips, more stuff. Pastor Erwin McMannus has written a powerful book called *Soul Cravings*. In it he talks about the insatiable human desire to find significance in life. Far too often we look in all the wrong places to find meaning and purpose. In contrast, Paul’s eyes are laser-focused on the ultimate joy: the prize of being *like* Christ and being *with him* forever.

A fifth reference to our joyful focus is in verse 20: “Our citizenship is in heaven.” While a young couple served on a mission trip in Chile, they gave birth to two children. As a result, the children had dual citizenship. They were citizens of both their native country the United States, and Chile. When they traveled as a family two passports were carried for each of them: one from the USA and one from Chile. But a day came when their citizenship in Chile lapsed. When the two youths turned 18 their Chilean citizenship ended and they became solely citizens of the USA.

In a similar way, right now every Christ follower has dual citizenship. We’re citizens of the earth and we’re also citizens of heaven. But one day our dual citizenship will end. Our earthly citizenship will lapse and the one that will remain will be our citizenship in heaven. What a joy that will be, Amen?!

A sixth reference to our joyful focus is also found in verse 20: “And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...” “From there” refers to heaven. Romans 8:34 tells us that Jesus Christ “is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” Right now, Jesus is in heaven praying for us! But the day will come when he will return to earth!

Listen to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still *alive* and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” This is known as the Rapture. Those who *believe* in Jesus at the Second Coming will be caught up to meet him in the clouds and be with him forever.

A seventh and final reference to our joyful focus is in verse 21. **The Lord will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”** I referred to this earlier. This is the final step in the process of salvation: the glorification of our bodies when the Lord will make us perfect like him.

Thus, this entire passage is filled with references to our joyful focus: becoming perfect like Christ and being with Jesus forever. Now I know that sometimes Christians have been so heavenly minded they’ve been no earthly effectiveness. That’s not what God wants. We need balance.

God is also concerned about things like justice, helping the poor and reaching the lost. But CS Lewis put it this way. “If we aim at heaven, we get the earth thrown in. But if we aim at the earth, we will miss both.” Paul’s passion in our passage is unmistakable. He’s relentless in his pursuit of his joyful focus to become perfect like Christ and to be with the Lord forever.

Look at the ways Paul expresses his passion as his joyful focus remains on being Christ-like and spending eternity with our Lord in heaven.

In verse 12 he writes, “I **press on** to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” Pressing on implies intentionality, discipline and persistence. In verse 13 he says, “one thing I do: **forgetting** what is behind...” The Greek term forgetting used here means *fully* forgetting; *completely* forgetting. This means fully letting go of the past in order to fully focus on and embrace the prize. Also in verse 13 “*straining* toward what is ahead...” *Straining* means applying intense physical and mental effort in the pursuit of *Christ-likeness* **and** *preparing for heaven*.

Now look at verse 14. “I press on toward the goal...” This is the same term found in verse 12. Pressing on means pressing on toward the goal to finish well.



In verse 17 Paul says to, “join with others in following my example...” Paul’s passionate pursuit to become like Christ is an example for us. We’re to take note of those who live with this passion, and join with them.

In verse 18 he again warns even with tears about false teachers. These false teachers live as enemies of the cross because they teach a works-based salvation. The cross represents God’s grace. The true gospel is salvation by Christ alone through faith alone. These false teachers are known as Judaizers. They taught that a person had to keep the Jewish law, in addition to embracing Christ, to be saved.

That’s why Paul says in verse 19 “their god is their stomach and their mind is on earthly things.” Bottom line: be careful. Don’t get sidetracked with incorrect doctrine. Be passionate about the most important things like pursuing Christ and preparing for heaven.

In verse 20 Paul writes, “we eagerly await a Savior...” Paul is longing for the day when Jesus returns. Like a kid waiting to open his presents on Christmas morning, Paul can’t wait to see Jesus face to face and be made like him.

Finally 4:1. “Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” Standing firm means not moving, not retreating, keeping focused. Holding our ground for Christ is an important way we can express our passion for Christ.

Thus, we see in our text Paul’s passionate pursuit of his joyful focus. He has a white-hot desire to become like Christ and be prepared for heaven. But now I’d like to ask you this question: How do you pursue these things yourself? How do you develop in Christ-likeness? How do you grow spiritually and prepare for eternity?

Each of us is different. Each of us connects with God in different ways. So how are you wired to pursue the prize God has prepared for you?

I think it's important to recognize that each of us has a different spiritual pathway for how we perceive God's presence and experience spiritual growth. One size does not fit all with regard to how we develop in our passion for God or how we grow spiritually. But we all have one or two or more pathways that fit us best.

In his book *God Is Closer Than You Think*, John Ortberg writes, "There is enormous freedom in identifying and embracing your spiritual pathway. It is a little like realizing that if you're an introvert, you don't have to work as a salesman; you could get a job in a library. You don't have to beat yourself up or feel guilty because of what is not your pathway. You can focus on relating to God in that way for which you were made..." Let me suggest a number of pathways that have helped different people to connect with God.

- *Intellectual Pathway*- People on the intellectual pathway draw closer to God as they learn more about him. Ideas are as alive to you as people. You love to study Scripture. The word "theology" has the same impact on you that the phrase "hot doughnuts now" has on the average customer of a Krispy Kreme shop. These folks love ideas and theology. They love to study Scripture. When these folks are in Bible study groups, they're the ones pushing to study the deep things about God.

- *Relational Pathway*- People who follow the relational pathway find that they have a deep sense of God's presence when they're involved in significant relationships. Jesus' statement that "**where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them**" makes perfect sense to a relational type.

Small groups and other community experiences become indispensable. People on this pathway need to lead a relationally rich life.

- *Serving Pathway*-Some people experience God's presence most when they're helping others. These are the folks who are always pushing to serve meals at the Toledo Gospel Rescue Mission. They connect with God best when they're doing something tangible for the Lord.

- *Worship Pathway*-These folks love to connect with God with praise and worship, and praise music. People on the worship pathway resonate with the psalmist who wrote, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" They have a natural gift for expression and celebration. Something deep inside them feels released when praise and adoration are given voice. Some of their most formative moments occur during times of worship. You may or may not be naturally expressive, but somehow in worship your heart opens up and you come alive. You sometimes find yourself in tears, sometimes in moments of deep joy, because God seems so close.

If this is your pathway, you need to experience great worship on a regular basis. You may want to turn your car into a rolling sanctuary, get great music that help you worship, then sing your lungs out as you drive down the road. Don't worry that we're all staring at you from our cars. This is how you connect to God. Besides, you will bring joy to all of us who watch.

- *Contemplative Pathway*-People who connect with God in this way need large blocks of time alone. God is most present to these folks when all the distractions are removed.

- Creation Pathway-These folks connect with God by experiencing Him in the majesty of his creation. I think this is why I enjoy walking and biking. I'm one of those people who feel like being out-of-doors is a spiritual experience.

Each of us is different. Which pathway is the one that helps you connect with God most? Paul's passion should be our passion. We should "press on," "forgetting what is behind," and "straining toward what is ahead." Do these terms describe how you pursue your spiritual life? Are you pressing on? Are you straining toward what is ahead? We all have different spiritual pathways to connect with God and grow. But none of the pathways help unless we keep our joyful focus.

The Taj Mahal is one of the most beautiful and costly tombs ever built. In 1629 the favorite wife of the Indian ruler Shah Jahan died. He ordered a magnificent tomb to be built as her memorial. The shah placed his wife's casket in the middle of a parcel of land and construction of the temple began around it. But several years into the venture, the shah's grief for his wife gave way to his passion for the project. One day while he was surveying the sight, he stumbled over a wooden box and he had some workers throw it out. It was months before he realized that they had tossed out his wife's casket. Sadly, the original purpose for the memorial got lost in the details of the construction.

Don't let that happen with your spiritual life. What can you do to press ahead with more focus this week? Do you need to turn off the TV? Do you need to say no to something so you have more time to focus on the Lord? Do you need to make yourself accountable to someone so you have more consistent devotions? At the end of the day, our joyful focus should remain our only focus. So, what are you doing to become more like Christ and prepare yourself for eternity?

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your love, for your grace, and

for the ultimate JOY of eternity with you in heaven.

Thank you for your perfect plan of salvation

through your Son our Lord Christ Jesus.

Father give us the strength to press on, with discipline and persistence,

give us the grace to forget what is behind us, and

the joyful focus to continue straining towards what is ahead,

life, forever, with you, in heaven.

May our life and our salvation, give you all the glory.

AMEN