

The high calling of God in Christ Jesus

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[0 : 00] Will you please turn now to the passage we read together, Philippians chapter 3. Philippians chapter 3 and we'll read verses 13 and 14 again.

That's page 1180. Philippians chapter 3 at verse 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 towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards, in Christ Jesus. I'm sure you noticed just over a week ago that the World Athletics Championships were held in Athens, in Greece. Now in my younger days I was very fond of athletics because I used to compete myself, and so I always watched on television as much as I can of these athletic events. Now, it is appropriate, I think, to think of these athletic events today, because Paul often used the games of his day, the Olympic games, the Greek games, as an example, as an illustration of the Christian life.

[1 : 19] And I've intentionally chosen this particular text because it is appropriate for us at this stage in our pilgrimage. It's a time of change, a time of change for me and my family, a time of change for you as a congregation.

And inevitably we look back and we look forward. Now, there's nothing wrong in looking back. In fact, it's a good thing to do. But we must also look forward.

We mustn't live in the past. We must press forwards. And this is what Paul is talking about here. He's using the example of a race, a long-distance race, and he's saying that the way we should run the race is forgetting what's behind, straining forward to what is ahead of us.

Now, let's look together at this. This illustration of the Christian life. Now, Paul had been at this stage on the road, on the Christian race for many, many years.

And yet he says, I haven't yet arrived. I'm still running. I'm still pressing forward. He assumed that those people to whom he was writing, the Philippians, that they too were on that road, that they had entered for the race that they were taking part in this race, pressing towards the goal.

[2 : 36] Now, can I assume the same about you? Have you started to run the Christian race? Oh, yes, you've been on the road of your life for many years now, perhaps. But have you begun to run the Christian race?

Have you begun the Christian life? That is how I would like to begin this morning, by looking at how to start this race. But Paul tells us what happened to him in this very chapter, in verse 12.

At the very end of verse 12, you'll notice, he says, Jesus Christ took hold of me. Now, what can he be referring to there? Well, obviously, I think, he's referring to his experience on the Damascus road, where Jesus Christ took hold of him.

Up to that time, Paul had been going on very happily, thank you, in Judaism. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, thinking that he was right with God. And then he met with Jesus Christ in a most amazing way.

Jesus Christ took hold of him, and changed his life irrevocably. And that was when he began the Christian race. We now might ask ourselves, well, what's the qualifying standard to reach, to get into this race?

[3 : 50] You know, to get to the World Games, or the Olympic Games, you've got to reach a certain standard, otherwise you just can't compete there. And many people think that that's the way you get into the Christian race as well. That you've got to have some kind of qualification to get in there.

Perhaps you're of godly parents. Perhaps you belong to a particularly sound church. Or perhaps you're of very good living. And you think that because of that, God will allow you to enter this race. Not at all.

Paul had all these qualifications, but that didn't qualify him to enter the Christian race. He tells us that here. He said, if anybody else had reason to glory in himself, to take pride in himself and his own qualifications, I had.

And he lists them there. Circumcised the eighth day, the people of Israel, tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of the Hebrews, Pharisee. According to the righteousness of the law, I was faultless.

Nobody could fault me on any point of the law. But when I met Christ, they counted for nothing.

They were just rubbish. Because these things can never please God.

[4 : 53] These things can never make us righteous before God. What's the qualifying standard? There is none. It is completely open entry. Anybody can come and enter this race once they admit that their own qualifications mean nothing.

They stand for nothing. Paul was reduced to a helpless, blind man who had to be led by the hand.

And only when his sight was restored was he able to follow Christ.

He came to realize that of himself he could do nothing for his own salvation. And so must we. There is no qualifying standard because we're all sinners.

We can never, never qualify for this race in our own strength. We've got to come to the starting line admitting that we can't do anything for ourselves. What is that starting line?

Well, surely it's what the Bible calls the new birth. Conversing. Jesus told Nicodemus again, a great Pharisee, a teacher of the law, people would have thought, what a wonderful man Nicodemus is.

[5 : 54] Surely he'll go to heaven. And Jesus said to him, unless you're born again, you can't even see the kingdom of God. Far less, enter it. And he says that to you and me. The starting line of this race is conversing, the new birth.

Coming simply to the Lord Jesus Christ, putting our faith in him, trusting him for what he has done for us on the cross. Giving up his life there in our place as a sacrifice for sin.

That's the starting line. There's no qualifying standard. We can't make ourselves fit to enter the race. But once we do enter, of course, we've got to keep ourselves fit day by day by obeying his word, relying upon him, trusting in him, following him.

Now those of you who know John Bunyan's great story, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, will perhaps remember two characters there in it. You know, Christian, the pilgrim, he entered the way, the pilgrim way, I might say, he started the Christian race by entering through a very narrow little door called a wicket gate.

He entered that narrow gate and he followed on the way to the cross and his burden of sin fell off. But later on, he met a lot of different characters and he met two characters who had not come through that little gate.

[7 : 07] According to Bunyan, they tumbled over a wall and came onto the path, onto the, into the Christian race and they were going along with, with the Christian there. And Bunyan gave him names. He called them formalist and hypocrite.

In other words, their religion was a mere outward show. They thought they were all right. They thought they were in the Christian race. They thought they were on their way to heaven that they had never entered by that little wicket gate.

They hadn't entered by the narrow gate on the straight and narrow way. That is the only way to start this race by coming to the Lord Jesus Christ and confessing our sin.

by freely admitting that we can't qualify for God's favour. That we've done nothing good in his sight. Once we do that, he receives us, he cleanses us, and he sets us on the way with new life, new obedience.

That's how to start the race then. Allow Christ Jesus to take hold of you today. He wants to take hold of your life, to change it, to relieve you of your burden of sin and of guilt and of fear and of worry.

[8 : 09] He wants to take hold of you, take you by the hand and lead you in his way. But how to run this race? It's a long distance race, not a sprint, this one. It goes on and on and on.

How to run this race? Well, Paul tells us here. First of all, we may say that we must run it humbly. Paul says in verse 13, I don't consider myself yet to have reached the goal.

Christ Jesus took hold of me to bring me to glory. Well, I haven't reached there yet. I've reached a certain degree of maturity but I'm not yet perfect. Paul was humble. Now, of course, Paul was a very strong man, a very learned man.

He had so many things going for him and yet he had this great humility about him. He called himself the chief of sinners. Me, the chief of sinners. He couldn't get over the wonder of it all that he who had persecuted the church that had been so self-righteous that God had saved him and that God was using him to bring others into his kingdom.

He couldn't get over that. Paul was so humble. That's the way we must run the Christian race too, in complete humility. You know, we're so tempted to compare ourselves with other people and say, well, I'm not as bad as he is.

[9:19] I'm making more progress than she is. we mustn't look upon life in that way. We mustn't compare ourselves with other people. We must run the Christian race humbly, realizing that we've not yet attained to the standard we ought to have.

We've not yet arrived. And also we must run this race depending on Jesus. What does Paul say in verses 7 to 10?

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. That is the way that Paul ran the Christian race. Trusting in Jesus, looking to him, following him.

All the other things, his learning, his knowledge of the law, his great intellect, and he must have had a tremendous brain, Paul, but he didn't rely on these things. He relied on Christ Jesus.

As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, Hebrews 12, verses 1 and 2, that has run with perseverance the race that's set before us, looking to Jesus. We run this race humbly, not trusting in ourselves.

[10:25] We run the race looking to Jesus, relying upon him for the strength that we need. Also, Paul ran this race single-mindedly. One thing I do, he said.

Of course, Paul did many things. Many, many things. And he was an expert in many things, I don't doubt. He even knew a bit about navigation. You remember, when he was on that journey by ship as a prisoner to Rome, he was giving very good advice to the seasoned seamen there, because Paul had gained a great deal of experience in Mediterranean seamanship.

He could do many things, did Paul. But these things paled into insignificance compared with the one thing necessary. One thing I do, he says. He ran this race single-mindedly.

Everything else was subservient to that. He brought every thought captive to Christ. All the learning he had in the Old Testament, all the learning that he must have had also in the Gentile authors, he quoted from them freely in his address to the Athenians, to the Areopagites.

He quoted from heathen authors. He knew so many things. But they were all subservient, all brought into the service of Christ. One thing I do, he says.

[11:37] Are you single-minded in your pursuit of Christ? Oh yes, we have to take our responsibilities and our family and our work and our studies, so many things we've got to take responsibility for.

And we must not neglect these. But, these things must become subservient to the one thing, following Christ, bringing everything to his footstool. So we run this race humbly, depending on Jesus, single-mindedly.

Then Paul goes on to say, and this I think illustrates the single-minded nature of his running. One thing I do, forgetting what's behind, straining towards what is ahead, I press on.

That's what single-mindedness meant for him. Well, what does he mean by forgetting the things that are behind? In what sense must we forget the things that are behind? Well, obviously, it doesn't mean that we blank out everything that happened to us in our past lives.

Because we know from Paul's own writings that he did not forget various things. He never forgot what he was by nature. He's already told us in this very chapter. He didn't forget that he was a circumcised Jew, that he was a Pharisee, a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

[12:55] He never forgot that. But what he means by forgetting it is that he didn't live in the past, he didn't rely on the past. He didn't say, well, because of all these, that wonderful heritage I've had, I'm all right, I can sit back.

Not at all. He forgot them in the sense that he didn't count on them any longer. He remembered them for what they were. He had a realistic view of them.

He was able to judge them now in the right light, in the light of what Christ had revealed to him. And so he knew he no longer relied on these things. He forgot them in that sense.

He looked at his past life now from an entirely different perspective and so must we. Paul never forgot his Damascus Road experience.

It made such an impression on him. If you look at the book of Acts, it's accounted for us there three times. Twice by himself in the various places. Once before the Jews in Jerusalem and once before the Roman governor.

[13:57] He never forgot his Damascus Road experience. Now you'd say, well, if I had an experience like that, I would live on it for the rest of my life. Not Paul. He forgot what was behind him in the sense that he didn't rely on that experience.

He never forgot it, but he didn't rely on it. That wasn't his passport to heaven, so to speak. Didn't go around saying, well, because of that experience I can do anything I like now. Not at all. As he says elsewhere, I beat my body to bring it into subjection.

There's a fight to be fought. There's a battle to be won. And it's not won by living in the past. Now Paul never forgot the people who had helped him.

I'm sure he never forgot Ananias, the man who came to pray over him so he could receive his sight. And if you read through Paul's letters, especially usually the last chapters, you'll see there the many people he mentions by name.

Paul was a great people person. Despite him being a great theologian, I think Paul has had a very bad press on the whole. People think of him as a very stern and rigid kind of man. Not at all. He was a great people person.

[14:57] And he never forgot these people. He mentions them by name. He prayed for them by name. He greeted them by name. He never forgot them. But he didn't live in the past.

That's the great thing about Paul. He said, I'm forgetting these things in the sense that I don't rely upon these past experiences and I press on to what's ahead of me. Now how may we apply these things to ourselves?

If that's the way that Paul ran the Christian race, how may we do it also? What are the things we must forget? Well, I've already hinted that one of the things we must forget in this sense is our past experiences.

You know, experiences might be of different kinds. They might be bad experiences. And so often we're tempted to dwell on past sins and failures. And we allow them to work on us like a cancer inside of us eating away at us.

The sin and the failure we're so ashamed of. And we allow them to paralyze us. And we never go forward at all. We never mature. We never grow. We never press forward to know Christ. As Paul says we must do.

[16:01] We allow those sins and failures to lurk there all the time. Now we must forget those past sins and failures. Why? Because God himself has already forgotten them.

He says once we confess our sin and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, he forgives them. That means he wipes our slate clean. He casts our sins behind his back, whatever that is, we don't know.

But he throws them into the sea of his forgetfulness. He never holds them against us any longer. And we must forget those past sins and failures and not allow them to paralyze us.

We remember them as sins forgiven. Yes, we learn from our past sins and failures. We avoid them. We avoid those situations where we might be tempted to repeat them. But we do not allow them to paralyze us. The devil is very fond of doing that. Saying, ah, well you did that. You didn't do that. You omitted to do that when you should have done.

[16:58] And it eats away at us and keeps us from making any progress. No, we confess that sin. God forgives us. He cleanses it away. He doesn't hold it against us. Why should we? We must not live in the past.

We must forget those bad experiences. But also, in a sense, we must forget the wonderful experiences. I've already mentioned that Paul never forgot his Damascus Road experience. But he didn't live on the strength of that for the rest of his days.

He wanted to go on to have new experiences. I remember once Professor Finlayson was asked if he believed in a second blessing. And he said, I believe in as many blessings as I can get.

You know, what he meant was that there's no point in saying, well, I've experienced conversion.

Well, that's all I need to experience. We must go on day by day experiencing more of God's grace.

Not dwelling in the past, relying on our past experiences, however wonderful they may have been.

So then we must forget our past experiences. In this particular sense. Not absolutely blanking them out, but not dwelling on them, living in them for good or for ill.

[18 : 05] Also, we must forget in a certain sense, certain places or occasions. You know, perhaps the place where you are converted, where you have perhaps had a wonderful experience of God, has become very dear to you.

And that's as it should be. But the temptation often is to say, well, if only I could recapture that. Thirty years ago in a certain church where I had that great feeling, there was tremendous fellowship surrounded by the Lord's people.

It was great and what a wonderful preacher. And we had those wonderful times in that particular place. And I wish I could recapture that. My friend, that is pointless. That will never be repeated in that absolute way again.

But the wonderful thing is that God promises more grace in whatever situation we are in. God is not tied to any particular place. Even in the Old Testament they knew that.

Although in a sense God's presence was there in the temple, those who were true believers experienced God wherever they were. And it's the same today. God is not tied by time or place as we are.

[19 : 07] And so we must forget those places, perhaps, which we hold dear. Not in the sense of absolutely blocking them out and forgetting them. Not in that sense. But in the sense of relying upon them for spiritual nurture.

Ours must be a present experience of God in Christ. And even, I would go as far as to say it, we must forget certain people. That's a terrible thing to say, isn't it?

Now, Paul never forgot those people who had helped him who were his fellow workers. I'm sure of that. He never forgot them. But he didn't rely on them to the extent that he couldn't get on without them.

Towards the end of his life, we read in 2 Timothy, he was alone. All his former helpers had deserted him for various reasons, some of them perhaps for good reasons. And he was very much alone. But he knew his Savior.

He knew God was with him. And so he wasn't relying on other people for his spiritual nurture. Yes, there is that plaintive note, take Mark and bring him with you because he's profitable to me for the gospel.

[20 : 08] John Mark would let him down many years previously. And now Paul had forgiven him. And he wanted Mark's company and help once again. Isn't that a wonderful touch? But Paul did not rely on people, other people, for his sustenance.

And we must get away from that too. Relying on a particular minister or a particular friend. Oh yes, it's a wonderful thing to have friends and to have particular counselors and helpers who can strengthen us in our spiritual life.

But we must try to wean ourselves off that kind of dependency. We must forget what is behind us and strain forward to what is ahead. You know, the harmful effects of looking back in a race.

If you've watched any of the athletics on television, sometimes you'll see athletes looking around to see who's coming up on them or where the opposition is. Now sometimes that works well. But sometimes it works the opposite way.

Because they look back and they become discouraged when they see somebody coming up very fast who seems much more fit than they are. Looking back can be a disadvantage in a race.

[21 : 12] Now in the Christian race too, looking back can be a disadvantage. We're always looking back and trying to hark back to the old days when we had great experiences, when there was places where we used to meet for wonderful fellowship, when there was people who could help us in so many ways.

We won't make any progress that way. We'll become more and more discouraged trying to relive the past and finding it's impossible to do so. We must press on.

Well, how does Paul say we do that? One thing I do, he says, forgetting what's behind, straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal.

Straining towards what is ahead. Now in a literal race, of course, that's the finishing line. And in the Olympic games or in the Roman games, the stadium in which they ran, it was usually, they had to run either one length or two or three lengths of the stadium, and there was a mark set or a pillar at one end of the stadium where they had to go and touch.

They were striving towards that mark or that goal. Now what is the goal or the mark in the Christian race? Well, he tells us here in verse 10, I want to know Christ.

[22 : 28] That is the goal to which we're striving, to which we're running. To know Christ and to become like him. You see, conversion, becoming a Christian is just the beginning of the Christian race.

There's a whole race to be run, a whole life to be lived, and the whole point of that life is to know Christ, to become more like him, more like what he would have us be. And that requires effort. The Christian life is not an easy life. It's not a life of sitting back and say, well, God has saved me now, we'll just wait until he takes me to heaven, not at all. We must strive day by day to overcome sin so that our characters might be renewed.

You see, that's the whole point of becoming a Christian, is that our characters might be renewed. Maybe that we might be made more like Christ. Now so many people say, well, that's just the way I'm made, I can't help it.

Not at all. The whole reason that Christ has taken hold of you and made you to be his child is to reform you, to remake you, to renew you in his image. He promises the strength that we must cooperate, we must strive to hate sin, to leave sin, to become more what he would have us be.

[23 : 42] So then, we forget what's behind us in that particular sense that I've been talking about, and we strain forward, we press forward to what's ahead of us. And the goal, of course, is to know and to become like the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is then this finishing line, and what is the prize at the end of the race? Verse 14, I press on towards the goal or the mark to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

The prize, of course, is heaven and being with Christ. The whole aim or goal of our Christian lives, of running the Christian race, is to know him and to become like him.

And the prize is that itself. Because in this life, we don't perfectly attain to that. But, when we leave this world, and it will happen to us all one day, when we are called away from this life, when we die and appear before our God, if we have been running the Christian race, looking to Jesus, trusting in him, following him, then the reward will be to see him, and when we see him, we shall be like him.

The reward will be to be with him forever, and to be like him forever. That is the aim, that's the goal, and that's the prize. In the Olympic Games, the old Olympic Games, way back in the early days, in the centuries before Christ, the only prize they got was a laurel, a laurel wreath.

[25 : 25] That's the only prize. Nowadays, of course, they get thousands and hundreds of thousands of dollars. But Paul says, those who take part in a race, do it for an earthly crown. But we do it, he says.

We run in the Christian race for a heavenly crown, a crown that cannot fade, a crown that cannot corrupt, a crown that cannot be taken from us. The Olympic medals, or the world championship medals, which men and women win, they will corrupt, they will fade, they won't last.

And even the Olympic or world records, which men and women can gain, they can be taken from them, as somebody else surpasses them. But the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus can never be taken away from us.

What a wonderful goal, that is. What a wonderful aim, what a wonderful finishing line set before us. If you have not already begun to run this Christian race, does that not attract you to it?

There's an old Roman proverb who said, not without the dust, the palm. In other words, if you want to win the palm, the laurel wreath of victory, you've got to undergo the sweat and the toil and the tears and the dust.

[26 : 39] And the same in the Christian life too. There's a wonderful goal set before us, but we've got to be prepared to strive and to run the race. It'll be costly, but it's worth it in the end. Have you begun to run this Christian race?

I challenge you this morning to come to the starting line. Not in your own strength. Not proud of your own qualifications of any kind.

But simply confessing your sin and unworthiness and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. And however far you are along the road of the Christian race, I would ask you to forget the things behind, only in the sense of which we have been talking, not living in the past.

I would challenge you and plead with you to look forward to what's ahead of us, to the glory that's set before us. Remember what the Lord Jesus Christ did. He went away before us. And he endured the cross, despising the shame for the glory that was set before him.

And the glory is set before you and me if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and if we follow him. I would like to close just by quoting from a hymn. Run the straight race through God's good grace. [27 : 49] Lift up your eyes and seek his face. Life with its path before us lies. Christ is the way and Christ the prize. Let us pray.

Most gracious God and Father, as we bow before you now, we give thanks. The Lord Jesus Christ has gone the way before us. He has run the race of this life and he has overcome. And he's willing now to grant us the victory.

Oh Lord God, help us then we pray, each one of us, to come and put our trust in him today, to follow in his way, forgetting the things that are behind and straining towards the things that are ahead of us, even for the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus.

Hear these our prayers. We give our sins for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.