

“On the Road to Glory”
Philippians 3:12-16
February 20, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage features one of the common metaphors for the Christian life. To use our modern phrase, it is like a road trip. Or if you prefer the older term, a pilgrimage or simply a journey. But this is no casual vacation trip. It is more like a quest in which everything is at stake. Think of Frodo’s quest in *Lord of the Rings*, where everything is on the line. Failure would end it all and success would bring every good thing about. The language Paul uses here evokes both that of a race with a prize to be won as well as a military campaign. Both involve strenuous effort as well as dangers.

Wendy and I had a memorable road trip over thirty years ago. It was a short trip to the hospital when she was in labor with Meredith. We had already been to the hospital once, and the doctor had sent us home because he mistakenly thought that this wasn’t the real labor. As it turned out, we waited a little too long to return and found ourselves stuck in heavy afternoon traffic on our way back to the hospital in Annapolis while Wendy was in the transition stage of labor. Thankfully, we arrived about ten minutes before she gave birth to our ten-pound, six-ounce daughter. Like the Christian life, it was a journey with significant hardship and uncertainty, but one that ended gloriously. That is the New Testament vision of the Christian life, and this metaphor of a pilgrimage or journey has a great deal to teach us.

I. The Destination of this Road

Paul described the destination in verses 8-11 of this chapter, a destination that is summarized in verse 11 as **“the resurrection from the dead.”** When we read that phrase, we naturally think of the resurrection of our bodies, and that is certainly part of this. But it is also bigger than our material resurrection. In *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis summarizes the promises of God for our final destination under five headings. First, we shall be with Christ. Second, we shall be like Him, realizing for the first time what it is to be truly and fully human as our sin nature is completely removed. Third, we shall have glory. For this third one, the Bible relies on various images for the simple reason that our current minds are incapable of grasping the nature and extent of this glory. Fourth, we will feast, an image of joy and lack of any want whatsoever. Finally, we shall have some sort of official and important position in the universe. In other words, work will be important and deeply satisfying.

I remember reading years ago of a missionary couple coming home to America for retirement after decades of faithful, but very difficult labors on the mission field. It so happened that Teddy Roosevelt was on the same ship, returning home after some overseas trip. As the ship pulled into the dock at New York harbor, there were thousands of people gathered to welcome the president home. The missionary husband complained that there was no one to welcome them home after their faithful labors for the Lord, and his wife wisely reminded him, "We're not home yet, dear."

It is easy for us to lose sight of our ultimate destination and give our hearts to some lesser destination. I appreciated the question asked by Lloyd Kim, our missions speaker last weekend. "What are your dreams?" Our culture seeks to train us to view financial independence as our ultimate destination. Any destination short of our glorious home with God will be a case of "Dog catches car." What I mean by that is that if you succeed in your dreams, you won't know what to do with your success. You will inevitably ask, "Is this all there is?" You will ask that because there is a God-shaped hole in the heart of each person that can only be filled by God himself.

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey's second habit is to "begin with the end in mind." He begins that chapter by asking people to imagine their own funeral. What will be said about you on that occasion? The principle of beginning with the end in mind is a good one, but Covey is mistaken about the end. It is not when friends and family gather at our funeral, but rather when all creation stands before the Lord on Judgment Day. Covey has another helpful analogy in this chapter. He is making the distinction between a manager and a leader and asks us to imagine a group on a trek through the jungle. The managers are hacking their way through the thick growth and making progress. A leader, he says, finds a tree and climbs to the top and announces, "Wrong Jungle." We are all to be leaders, at the very least of our own lives. Are you in the wrong jungle? Is your destination the same as the one Paul declares here?

II. The Dangers on the Road

Much of this passage deals with various dangers we may encounter on the road to glory. In the very first verse Paul addresses the danger of perfectionism. **"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own"** (v. 12). Is this a real danger? In my years of pastoring, I can only recall one person who claimed perfection. Most of us are quick to acknowledge that we are far from perfect. So what is the danger here? I believe it lies in the desire for some sort of coasting in the Christian life. A person who is perfect already would no longer need to struggle in the Christian life because they have already arrived. We could call this "plateaued Christianity." There are a variety of theological errors of the Christian life that could fit within this

category. Most are some form of teaching about a second blessing. Where the first blessing is coming to faith in Christ, the second blessing is some type of special resource from God that puts a person on a higher plain. It is often presented by using the term “secret,” as in “the secret to living the Christian life.” This second blessing may be the filling of the Holy Spirit or some act of devotion to God. In some teaching, it is learning to “let go and let God.” All of these expect to find some experience that can take the Christian to a place where they don’t have to struggle so much.

It is clear that Paul didn’t expect that he would ever get to the place where he could just begin coasting in the Christian life. He expected to struggle in his walk with the Lord until the day he died. He uses words that were commonly used of athletes in a race. If you are in a race, you don’t ever coast. You push forward with everything you have until the very end of the race. Paul said that he “strains forward to what lies ahead.” **“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”** (v. 14).

The application of this is that we are going to need to be prepared to fight for as long as we live. We may long for rest, but we need to realize that the rest we long for will not come in this life. You may be able retire from a working life, but you can never retire from the Christian life. Following Christ will always be like swimming against the current in that the moment we stop pushing forward we start going backwards. There is a bumper sticker I sometimes see that says, “I’m not perfect, just forgiven.” Of course, that is a true statement. But in my experience it is often a truth that is misused to excuse passivity in the Christian life. Spurgeon says, “I know many who say that they are imperfect, and they seem to be quite satisfied to be so.” Though our imperfection is undeniable, we should find no comfort in that reality.

The second danger on this road is to become paralyzed by one’s past. Paul writes, **“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on”** (v. 13-14a). The runner in a race learns not to look backwards, but keeps his eyes focused on what lies ahead. A focus on the past will impede our progress toward our goal of Christlikeness. What is it about the past that needs forgetting? Is it past sins or past accomplishments? Paul is probably referring to his past accomplishments, those things that he had taken such pride in that were listed earlier in this chapter. But both can impede us in our walk with Christ. It is not uncommon for some to let themselves be paralyzed by guilt for past sins. They keep beating themselves up with regret and remorse, replaying the past in their minds and rehearsing what they should have done. It is a good thing to learn from our past sins and failures, but not a good thing to dwell on these things to the point of paralysis.

It is also possible to be paralyzed by dwelling on past accomplishments. I have seen this happen with churches. I was once called upon to assist a

church that was having some serious problems. It was a church with a fruitful past that was often mentioned in my talks with them. Their efforts seemed to be focused on recapturing that past rather than moving forward with what God had for them in the present. We can do the same thing as people, dwelling on our past accomplishments instead of trusting God for any new future he may have for us. The good news is that there is always a good future for God's children. Remember that Paul wrote these words from prison, and that he was much closer to the end of his ministry than to its beginning. But instead of dwelling on the past, he writes that he is **“straining forward to what lies ahead”** (v. 13).

The third danger on the road is trying to control other people. Verse 15 is a much-needed verse for our day. **“Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”** Paul wants everyone to think like he does on this matter. He wants them not to rest on their laurels but to keep pushing forward in their walk with Christ. But notice what he says about those who may disagree with him. He doesn't say that mature Christians should separate from those who are not thinking straight. He doesn't say that mature Christians should just keep badgering other Christians about how wrong they are. He simply trusts that God is able to set straight any of his children who aren't thinking straight. God calls us to love people, not to force needed changes in their lives. That doesn't mean that there are not times to correct people and intervene in their lives. But perhaps we could use a little more patience with people instead. This verse reflects one of the phrases I use constantly in my counseling work. The phrase is to have a non-anxious presence in the lives of those with whom we are in conflict. That's what Paul is saying here. He's not writing people off and distancing himself from them, but staying present in their lives. He's also not trying to control them, but rather non-anxiously trusting God for them.

III. The Reassurance for the Road

There are many dangers on our road to glory, but also an unfailing resource available to us. Notice verse 12. **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”** The word that is translated “make it my own,” is a word with the idea of grasping something with force. Paul has come to know what a treasure Jesus is, and by faith he has laid hold of Jesus and won't let go. But the truth is that our hold on Jesus is too weak to keep us from danger. The world, our sinful nature, and the devil are all enemies who can easily destroy us. That's what makes the end of this verse such good news. Paul is grasping with force because Jesus is grasping with force. Paul may be holding on to Jesus, but the most significant factor is that Jesus is holding on to Paul.

If you come to my office, you will notice several photographs of my grandchildren. One of them is older than the others. It's a photograph of my now almost six-year-old grandson sitting on my lap when he was only about 18 months old. He has his entire hand grasping my index finger. But my hand, which is in the foreground of the picture, a hand that is much larger and stronger than his, is holding onto him. Further, my eyes are looking down at him, while his eyes are looking out at something across the room. That picture speaks to me of God's power and love. His eyes are always on me, seeing me as no one else does. And his hand is upon me, holding me tight. I am also holding on to him, but thankfully his grip is far more powerful than mine. And because his eyes are always on me, I can look out toward the future with hope and confidence.

CONCLUSION:

Let me leave you with two words that I think capture this passage well and which describe the primary attitude toward our Christian lives. The two words are "strive" and "trust". We strive for Christlikeness, for holiness, and for growth as Christians. We understand and accept the fact that the normal Christian life will require every ounce of energy we have. I am running a race and pushing as hard as I can. But there is another side too. God is my good Father who is watching out for me, strengthening me, and providing me with everything I need. I must rest and trust. So what we have is the paradox of restlessness and restfulness.

Which of these two sides of the Christian life needs more attention for you in your current journey? Are you too passive? Are you like those of whom Spurgeon spoke, who admit of their imperfection and seem quite satisfied to be so? Or is anxiety a better word for describing your current life. Or perhaps you are at a place currently where both passivity and anxiety describe your life. Let me remind you that there is always hope to get back in the race and take a positive step forward. What might that step look like for you?