

Lent 5 / April 6, 2025

Philippians 3:14

*“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

Pressing on toward the goal for the prize in Christ Jesus

St. Paul writes. *“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* Have you ever pressed hard towards a goal to receive a prize? All across the country, university students are preparing for final examinations. It’s crunch time. The goal is to pass their examinations. The prize is the degree or diploma which they seek. In the world of sports, hockey and basketball teams are nearing the conclusion of an arduous regular season. The goal is to make the playoffs. The prize is to win the league championship. Some will achieve the first goal, but only one will receive the prize.

Paul sometimes used long distance running as an analogy for the Christian life. Long-distance running is physically demanding and mentally challenging. Simply completing the course is a prize to be valued. When I ran many years ago, my goal was to make it home without getting hit by a car, or having to stop running and walk. During the course of the run there were critical points in which I had to press on, or else there would be a long walk home. There was the pain in the side, the heaviness of the legs and the temptation to look, back to see how far I had come, or ahead, to see how far I had to go. I had smaller goals on the way, make it past that road sign, get past that farm with the dogs, reach the halfway point, turn around and head for home with the wind at my back. My ultimate goal was to make it back home. The prize was to stop.

The Christian life is likened by Paul to a course rather than a race. It’s not a race! It doesn’t matter who reaches the finish line first. In fact, most people try to put off crossing the finish line for as long a possible. What matters is that we complete the course. The prize doesn’t go to the fastest. It goes to the faithful. The prize is not won by our physical endurance or spiritual stamina. It was won for us by Christ who ran the course before us, enduring the cross for our forgiveness, so we would receive the prize of eternal life. The prize, won by Christ, is received through faith in Him as our God and Saviour. We don’t run the course alone. We run together, as sisters and brothers. We run with the Holy Spirit at our backs. We follow Christ in faith and faithfulness. He has already completed the course and won the prize. We

press on toward the goal to receive the prize, not looking back at the sins that lie behind. We press on in faith, fixing our eyes on Jesus. He leads us to the goal. His Spirit impels us towards the end of our earthly course and the prize which Christ won for us, eternal life in His presence with the Spirit and the Father.

Paul writes, *"I press on toward the goal."* Sometimes the course is smooth, other times we have to press ourselves to go on. There were times when those endorphins would kick in and I would get that euphoria they call the runners high and I could run for hours, or at least it felt that way. I tended not to act on it, because if they ever kicked out when I was far from home, there would be a long walk. Sometimes it's like that in our lives in Christ, the course is smooth, the Spirit is at our back and we move forward effortlessly. The believers in Jerusalem were on a spiritual high following Pentecost. They had spoken in other languages. They saw the apostles perform miracles. Their fellowship grew exponentially, as daily the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. But then they hit the wall as they call it in the running world. The endorphins kicked out. Stephen was stoned to death and Saul whom we know as Paul, persecuted the church like a savage beast. Now it wasn't so easy to run the course. Now they had to press on.

We thank the Lord for times of peace, prosperity and joy in the Spirit. But we know it's not always going to be that way. Bad things will happen and hard times will come. Peter said, *"it is with much affliction that we enter the kingdom of heaven."* In fact, from our earthly perspective, it always ends badly. We achieve the goal of our faith by dying and death is not a pleasant experience. Paul urges us to press on towards the goal to receive the prize, by joining our sufferings to the sufferings of Christ. He wants to share Christ's sufferings, to become like Him in death and know the power of His resurrection. We press on towards the goal by focussing our faith on Jesus, His suffering, death and resurrection. Death is almost always preceded and accompanied by suffering, sometimes by very serious pain. It certainly was for Christ. When suffering, chronic affliction and great pain come, we need to actively and consciously press on towards the goal, which is not death, but the life we will receive in Christ when we pass through death. The goal is to pass through death and into the presence of Christ to receive the prize of sharing in His resurrection to a new and everlasting life.

We press on by seeking Christ in the promises God makes through Him in scripture. He promises never leave or forsake us. He promises nothing will be able to separate us from His love in Christ Jesus our Lord. We press on remembering His promises in our baptism, forgiveness of sin and a share in His resurrection, the

power of the Holy Spirit to walk in newness of life. We press on receiving the gift of His holy body and precious blood in the sacrament of Holy Communion. In this sacred meal He nourishes our faith, forgives our sins, gives us a foretaste of the victory celebration and gives us His Spirit through whom He empowers us to press on.

Jesus' goal was the cross upon which He died. Not much of a goal from the world's perspective. But on the cross Christ achieved His goal of atoning for the sin of the world. On the cross Jesus won the prize of the salvation for all people, especially for those who believe. Jesus' course was long and arduous. He was the greatest long-distance runner. He faced the greatest adversities and ran the most challenging course. His course was thirty-three years long and ended at the cross. His adversaries were the world, which hated Him and the devil, who had been watching for Him for ages as the One God said would bruise his head and bring his domain to an end. Jesus pressed on in the Garden, when His sweat was like blood running down His face and He prayed, "*Father, if it be possible take this cup of suffering from me.*" We may pray the same prayer someday if we are faced with a suffering we cannot bear. Remember Jesus when you pray. Remember Jesus pressed on to the cross for you, so in Him, you would press on toward the goal and receive the prize which He won for you, victory over sin, the devil and death.

We press on towards the goal, knowing He is with us in every suffering, trial and affliction of life. He is with us through the Spirit and the word, so we may endure to the end of our earthly lives, cross the line and receive the prize. The goal is to pass through this life trusting in His grace, so we may receive the prize that He won on the cross, salvation from sin and death and a share in His resurrection to life everlasting. Jesus achieved his goal when from the cross He shouted out, "*It is finished,*" committed His spirit into the Father's hands and died. The goal of salvation was accomplished. The prize was claimed on the third day when He rose victorious from the grave. He offers the prize for all to receive. He shares the prize with all who believe. The goal of our faith is to come to the end of our earthly journey and say with Jesus, "*Father into your hands I commit my spirit.*" The prize of our faith is to share in Christ's resurrection to eternal life. God bless us to press on toward the goal, so that with St. Paul and the saints who have gone before us, we too may receive the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus. In His Name. Amen

