

Goals and Growth

We often tend to look back over our lives, perhaps especially at the beginning of a new year, when we may think of ways in which we would like to change direction, maybe even make decisions which we intend to follow through - the dreaded 'New Year Resolutions' !

Apart from the temptation to get into gloomy introspection, or trying to transform our lives by self-effort and determination, we can all too easily fall into the danger of getting ourselves into self- condemnation when we look at passages of Scripture that make us feel like failures. **Philippians 3** is a chapter that some of us dread, for exactly this reason. We see Paul the apostle, so completely sold out for the Lord Jesus that we feel like spiritual midgets and decide that we might as well give up now, without any further effort!

On the other hand, if we look again, we can see that Paul makes no claims of great spiritual maturity for himself. The central verses of the chapter are probably **verses 12-16**, so let's look at those first, even if we have to come back and 'pick up the pieces' a little afterwards!

"First of all", says Paul, "let's get one thing clear - I have NOT 'arrived'; there is still plenty more that I need to take hold of fully." He uses this same word three times in two verses. It means to fully lay hold of, to take completely to yourself, to totally receive. He uses it in **verse 12** to say that is his goal, that is where he is going, to fully take hold of whatever it is that the Lord Jesus has planned for him. In **verse 13** he underlines that he knows he has not yet achieved it.

We could easily start getting discouraged again, couldn't we? Here is Paul, the great apostle, probably by now towards the end of his life, having achieved enormous results, and he says he has not reached the goal yet. What hope for us?

In the second part of **verse 12**, Paul uses that word again. Although he freely acknowledges that he has not yet fully taken hold, he says that someone else has done, has fully taken hold of him, Paul, for a specific purpose. Who has? The Lord Jesus Christ!

We maybe think of being a Christian as being that we have taken hold of Jesus. "No", says Paul, "it's the other way round - he has taken hold of me." We need to hear this for ourselves. As Jesus said (in **John**

15:16), we did not choose him, he chose us - again for a purpose. Have you realised this? It makes a massive difference to the way you live! It's no longer a question of trying to live a 'good Christian life' in order to 'come up to standard' and become acceptable. If I belong to him, then I can start from the position of knowing that he has fully taken me to himself, fully accepted me - that's my starting point, not my goal!

So what is Paul's goal? We could list several items from this chapter, but they are all summed up in **verses 8 & 9** :- "*. . . that I may gain Christ, and be found in him . . .*" and in the words we have been looking at in **verse 12** :- "*. . . to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*". Not great visible success in his work and ministry, not numbers of sermons preached, people won for Christ or churches planted. Just being in Christ, knowing him more, learning to 'abide', finding out what his purpose is for me and seeking to take hold of it.

All believers can do this, whatever we feel are our limitations and failures. As Paul says, "*. . . forgetting what is behind and straining toward to what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.*" The Greek word translated 'forgetting' is actually a bit stronger. It is a deliberate forgetting, 'disregarding' really, and the word 'straining forward' means 'stretching forward'. Just to add to the meaning, 'press on' means to 'chase after'! 'Those of us who are mature', says Paul, 'let's live this way' (**verse 15**), and he is confident that if anyone thinks differently, God will show them this is the way to live!

Are we ready to disregard the past? It is really welcome to be able to put behind us all our failures and embarrassments, but we also need to let go of all the things that might give us some grounds to be proud of ourselves, or that make us feel that someone owes us something. It was especially Paul's 'qualifications' that he knew he needed to leave behind - there's a list of them in **verses 4-6**. As far as he was concerned, they were actually negative factors, a loss, and he counted them as fit only for the rubbish dump. Worth dumping, in fact, so that he might be fully relying on Jesus and what he has done!

This is a very real challenge for us as we seek to grow in Christ. We all like 'feelgood factors', reasons to be happy with ourselves and the world around us, and it is easy to feel that we are living a successful life as a Christian when everything is looking good. When the circumstances change, how do we feel? We may realise that we have been relying on the 'feelgood factors' instead of the grace of God. Part

of Christian maturity is learning to hold onto what Jesus has done for me rather than fretting about how badly 'things' are going. Paul says it like this: ". . . so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." (**verses 8 & 9**)

There is one danger, though, in disregarding the past and pressing on into the future. We probably all know (or have known) Christian believers who are always into something new, the latest fashion in songs, doctrine, words or behaviour. They tend to be so 'adaptable' that they are unreliable, so 'free' that they can be 'rejoicing in the Lord' one minute and then apparently miles away from him the next. Paul is not trying to encourage this sort of 'butterfly Christian' living, so he sounds a word of warning in **verse 16**:-

"Only let us live up to what we have already attained". This could be a misleading verse if we think in terms of achieving a 'standard' of behaviour. Trying to live up to a standard is just another form of legalism, and many of us have struggled for far too long with trying to 'live the Christian life' in that way. (Perhaps you still do? Let me refer you back to **verse 9** again!)

The word translated 'live up to' actually means to 'follow in a line'. Paul is not telling the Philippians to try to measure up to some man-made (or even God-made!) standard, but simply to stay in line with what they have already learned. "So", he says, "please disregard the past with all its achievements and failures, but please don't disregard where the Lord has brought you so far."

In other words, as we stretch forward to take hold of more and more of the Lord's purposes for us, we will find that each new aspect fits together with the way the Lord has already brought us. We will not be some sort of spiritual 'fashion victim', ready to automatically take on the latest Christian craze, but someone in whose life the Holy Spirit is building more and more of Jesus, stepping in line to greater spiritual maturity.

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The lack of maturity among believers must be one of the most pressing problems in the Church of Jesus Christ world-wide. One of the most frightening aspects of our immaturity is that we are frequently unaware of it. Of course we should not expect to be instantly mature as

soon as we start out on the Christian life, any more than we would expect a new-born baby to become mature overnight. But if the years go by and the baby is still acting like a baby, we have reason to worry - something must have gone wrong with its development.

Paul's words in this chapter give us some pointers:-

1) He is sure that the Lord Jesus has taken hold of him (**v. 12**). There is no way that we can grow unless we have entered the kingdom of God through being 'born from above'. Please don't try to grow before you are sure of this - you will only be deceiving yourself.

2) He is clear about his priorities (**v. 7-9**). I am very glad that I was told fairly early in my Christian experience that the Lord Jesus needed to be priority number 1. Until that began to sink in, my 'Christianity' was rather more like a hobby, with lots of different activities that went with it. Interesting, even enjoyable, but not very important, and certainly not at the centre of my life. Like Paul, we need to state our position, even though we know that we often fail to match up to it.

3) He wants whatever God has for him, and is not prepared to settle for less, whatever the cost to him personally. If this is the cry of our heart, the Lord can start to do things with us, however often we fail.

4) He knows that he needs to keep on learning, growing and taking hold of more and more as the purposes of God are revealed to him. We need to keep our 'L' plates on!

5) In the end, what he most looks forward to is the prize of being called up to God in Christ. Other things may be great, exciting, fulfilling, glorifying to God, building the church and so on, but they pale into insignificance next to the prospect of being with Jesus, fully and completely.

**"What is more,
I consider everything a loss
compared to
the surpassing greatness of
knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"
(Philippians 3:8)**

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