

What Lies Ahead

Philippians 3:4b-14

INTRODUCTION

I ... am guilty. There ... I said it. I am guilty. My kids are guilty, too. All three of them. And truth be told, you all are probably guilty as well. And, in fact, I think probably everyone in the world would have to join us in that very same confession.

What am I talking about? Something that is a part of every family vacation and every trip over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house. Get in the car drive a distance of any significant length, and from the back seat some little voice is guaranteed to say:

Are we there yet?

A man named Jack Breakwell reported that one such trip his four-year-old son was the guilty party.

- They had barely started their journey when that little voice from the back seat said: "Daddy, are we there yet?"
- "No," Jack replied, "and you can't ask that question again for six more hours."
- There was a pause of a couple of minutes before his son spoke again:
- "Daddy, has it been six hours yet?"

You and I – along with every professing Christian – are on a journey. It is a journey of an unknown distance. How long it will take, we don't know. But we do know that this journey will end in one of two ways:

Either we will die and go to heaven or Jesus will come back before we do.

For the last 2,000 years our Christian brothers and sisters of every age have looked at the world around them, and wondered:

Are we there yet?

Is this it? Are we living in the last days? Is Jesus coming soon?

- I personally am wondering about that right now. This world is a mess.
- I often find myself thinking: Surely if Jesus doesn't return in my lifetime, my grandkids will experience it, right?

That's one journey. But you and I are on a second journey right now, too. In eight weeks, it will be Christ the King Sunday. That's the day we as a church and Christian Kingdom will celebrate the return of Christ and the final establishment of His Kingdom.

- Our lectionary readings between now and then will all point to that day.
- We are on a journey toward a celebration.

In keeping with that I am starting a new sermon series I have appropriately titled "Are We There Yet?"

- Today we start in my favorite passage of Scripture in the entire Bible: Philippians 3:4b-14. And, in particular, we start in verses 13-14, where the Apostle Paul writes:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward **what lies ahead**, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13b-14)

What lies ahead. That's today's key phrase for this journey.

- Are we there yet? No. We have not arrived at either of our destinations. Jesus hasn't returned and it is not November 22.
- What lies ahead? Between now and that day (either day) stuff is going to happen. So in this text, Paul talks to us about that. He talks about "what lies ahead."

I am going to highlight three words to help us see what Paul is teaching.

WORD #1: PRESS

Paul writes:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I **PRESS** on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13b-14)

"I press on!" This Greek word carries with it the idea of intense endeavor.

- The Greeks used it to describe a hunter eagerly pursuing his prey or a sprinter stretching for the finish line.

You do not become a winning athlete by listening to lectures, watching movies, reading books, or cheering at the games. You become a winning athlete by getting into the game and playing with a determination to win! That's pressing. You are in it to win it.

Paul was experienced in the practice of PRESSING, and he had been for in his entire life. Earlier in this chapter he described his previous life of pressing:

You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book. (Philippians 3:5-6)

The same zeal that Paul employed when he persecuted the church, he now displayed in serving Christ.

- Notice his words: "fiery defender." "meticulous" "strict" "devout:

- There was an energy to his pressing – an intensity. It was not simply movement, but an energetic movement – a pressing – a desire to keep on accomplishing something.

When Pablo Casals reached 95, a young reporter posed a question to him: “Mr. Casals, you are 95 and the greatest cellist that ever lived. Why do you still practice six hours a day?” And Mr. Casals answered, “Because I think I am finally making progress.”

While we wait for the return of Christ, Paul urges us to press on. We don’t quit. Because we are not there yet.

WORD #2: TOWARD

Look again at our key verse:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on **TOWARD** the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13b-14)

Pressing on with zeal is awesome ... provided we are pressing on in the right direction.

- We want to be going TOWARD.

Last weekend Karen and I went to St. Louis to celebrate the birthdays of four of our grandchildren. Their birthdays all cluster around this time of the year and since we aren’t able to go for each one individually, we try to visit somewhere in the middle.

While we were there we had the bonus privilege of watching the older two play soccer games. Chandler is our now five-year-old granddaughter. Watching five-year-olds play soccer is pure entertainment.

- Among all the entertainment, you will see that at some point – at many points – during the game one of the girls will finally get her foot on the ball and have a wide-open fast break toward the goal.
- And down the field she will sprint! Her face showing her determination. Her little arms pumping. That ball rolling purposefully toward the goal.
- The only problem is that it is the wrong goal!
 - The parents and coaches all start screaming “the other way!”
 - Hopefully, she turns around ... but sometimes ... oops.

This kind of mistake is not limited to five-year-old soccer.

- My dad often talked about the time he pulled down a massive rebound in a church basketball game, did a couple of pump fakes and put the ball back up for a basket ... thereby scoring two points for the other team.
- One of the most famous plays in all of football history involved Jim Marshall, a defensive player for the Minnesota Vikings, who recovered a fumble and sprinted to the wrong end zone, resulting in a safety for his opponent.

In the midst of the struggle, it is easy to get turned around and press on toward the wrong goal.

- The key word here is TOWARD, not away.
- The goal is never behind us. It is always ahead of us.

Author Stephen Covey says it like this:

Your most important work is always ahead of you, never behind you.

He writes about personal development, but his statement is applicable to the church and to our spiritual development as well. It is a powerful reminder to focus on the future rather than dwell on the past. It means that life's greatest contributions are not in what has already been achieved, but in what still lies before us.

- You didn't do your devotions this week. That's in the past. Move toward the goal.
- You lost your temper again and you have been working on that. That's in the past. Move toward the goal.
- You chickened out on a chance to share your faith with your neighbor, and you have been praying for an opportunity to do just that. That's in the past. Move toward the goal.
- And Paul tells us there is a specific direction we need to go. TOWARD the ...

WORD #3: GOAL

Again, our key verse:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the **GOAL** to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13b-14)

What's the goal? You see it in that verse: To win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

In verse 10, Paul frames it like this:

I want to know Christ. (Philippians 3:10)

Peter describes it like this:

Now you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:9)

And of course we add to that the words of the Great Commission:

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)

Those are the things we press toward. Anything else is running to the wrong goal.

Application

You might know author Anne Graham Lotz as the daughter of Billy Graham, but she is a powerful communicator in her own right. In fact, Billy once called her the best preacher in the family. She told this story about an old missionary named Samuel Morrison in her book, "Heaven, My Father's House".

Morrison who spent twenty-five years doing ministry in Africa, and it was time to return to the United States. It just so happened he was sailing on the same ocean liner that brought President Teddy Roosevelt back from a hunting expedition in Africa.

When they docked, President Roosevelt was bombarded with scores of people welcoming him home. Barriers and police escorts were needed to keep the masses of people from rushing the President, mobbing him or crushing him. He was welcomed with lots of cheering, ticker tape and confetti.

By contrast, Morrison walked off the ship alone. No one noticed, no one even knew he was there. He couldn't even hail a cab for a ride.

In his heart Morrison complained to God. "The president was in Africa hunting for three weeks, killing animals for sport and the whole world turns out to welcome him home. I've given twenty-five years of my life in Africa, serving You and no one has greeted me or even knows I'm here."

In his questioning heart he heard the gentle, loving voice of God whisper to his spirit, "My child, you are not home yet!"

Are you pressing toward the goal?

Amen.