

Pressing Toward the Goal

Summary and Goal

What is the Christian life? How is the Christian's outlook on life different from the world's? These are basic questions that every Christian must ask at some point. Paul understood how the gospel transforms one's life, having gone from the committed, presumptuous Pharisee to the humble, tent-making apostle. Paul discussed this contrast specifically in his Letter to the Philippians. Not only do we as Christians have a different mind-set toward our past than do non-Christians but we also have different motivations and goals for the future. Because of our relationship with the risen Jesus, we can have confidence that we too will experience victory one day in the form of resurrection glory.

Session Outline

1. Run the race without hindrances (Phil. 3:7-11).
2. Run the race, pressing forward toward the goal (Phil. 3:12-14).
3. Run the race with victory in mind (Phil. 3:15-21).

Background Passage: Philippians

Session in a Sentence

Life in Christ is like running a race in which His people press on toward victory.

Christ Connection

The apostle Paul described life in Christ as running a race in which we press on toward the goal of fully knowing Jesus as we hope in the final victory of our glorified bodies. Our perseverance in the race reminds us of Jesus and His endurance of the cross, which provided forgiveness of our sins and salvation.

Missional Application

Because Jesus fixed His sight on the victory that awaited Him, we persevere, fixing our gaze on the hope that one day we will be glorified with Him.

Date of My Bible Study: _____

Point 1: Run the race without hindrances (Phil. 3:7-11).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Philippians 3:7-11 (DDG p. 39).

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 39) to discuss the *sins* and *distractions* that potentially hinder runners in the race of the Christian life.

What is the Christian life? How is the Christian's outlook on life different from the world's? Paul described life in Christ as running a race (1 Cor. 9:24; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:7). The runners need a focused outlook; therefore, they must lay aside everything that slows down and hinders, which includes *sin* and *distractions* (Heb. 12:1).

- *Sin:* Sin entraps people, both believers and non-believers alike. It holds sinners in a cycle of guilt and shame. It stays the feet of those who want to obey and run. Sin saps the believer's energy and destroys motivation. The race of the Christian life cannot be run well while the believer is holding onto the weights of sin.
- *Distractions:* The main hindrance in this passage is that of distractions, even the good things that could keep our eyes off of Jesus. Paul recognized that all his religious background and credentials as a Jew and specifically a Pharisee ultimately were worthless when compared to the value of knowing Jesus.

Commentary: According to Acts 16, the church in Philippi started during Paul's second missionary journey. A vision led Paul and his traveling companions to Macedonia, where they made their way to Philippi, an important city in the region. Paul stayed there a few days, and Lydia and also Paul's jailer and his family came to faith in Jesus (Acts 16:11-15,25-34). These were among the first converts for the new church Paul would plant in the city. What was Paul's intent in writing this letter? His goal, as always, was to make Christ known and encourage believers to mature in their faith (see Phil. 1:9-11). One means of doing this entailed describing how God has changed him and his outlook on his religious life and pursuits.

PACK ITEM 5: MERE GRACE: Read the **John Owen quote** on this poster and ask group members the following question.



What are some distractions people should be willing to count as a loss because of Christ? (our race and heritage; our financial standing; our reputations as "good people"; our wealth of knowledge and wisdom)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 39) to emphasize that laying aside our hindrances must be coupled with focusing on knowing Jesus and His righteousness.

We can more easily lay aside our hindrances when we, like Paul, understand the all-surpassing value of knowing Jesus and His righteousness. Paul had come to realize that nothing of his own merit or good work could inherit eternal life. His only hope, and ours, is the righteousness of Christ granted to us by faith in Christ. With this mind-set, we are free to run the race set before us.




Voices from Church History

“What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has in a way that no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?”¹

—J. I. Packer (1926-2020)

-
- Paul stressed that religion, regulations, and rituals would not do any good to make someone right before God. Rather, righteousness is a gift from God by grace through faith in Jesus, not something we can earn or accumulate ourselves. Therefore, we are reconciled to God by His grace as we come to know Him and His Son through faith, sharing in Christ’s sufferings and looking forward to our resurrection with Him.
 - Christians do not work for salvation but instead work out their salvation to make Christ more evident in their lives (Phil. 2:12-13). We do so not by looking at the Christ-less world but by fixing our eyes on Christ Himself.
-

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

 Why should the gift of Christ’s righteousness through faith free us to run the race of the Christian life? (we need not be shackled by guilt and shame because we are free from our sin in Christ; because we know we cannot earn God’s righteousness nor can we lose it; salvation by grace alone through faith alone shows we are loved unconditionally by God)

Point 2: Run the race, pressing forward toward the goal (Phil. 3:12-14).

READ Philippians 3:12-14 (DDG p. 40).

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. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 40) to emphasize the effort Christians exhibit because of the effort already exhibited by Christ on our behalf.

The Christian life is one of discipline and striving toward a goal. It is not easy and it requires effort, hence Paul's use of athletic imagery in this passage. We cannot coast through this race but must pursue the prize. Yet we do so because the prize has already been won for us. Christ Jesus ran the perfect race to the end to assure us that our goal would be waiting for us. So we can forget the past, with all of its failures and heartaches, and press forward in forgiveness with confidence, knowing what we are aiming for.

- The apostle Paul—even Paul, the great missionary—did not consider himself to have “arrived” spiritually. The same goes for every Christian. The Christian life begins and ends with humility and repentance.
- Sadly, Christians often exhibit the attitude of already having “arrived.” Such persons may communicate through their words and actions that they have already reached the highest point of Christian maturity. Others may coast, content with the truth that Jesus has taken hold of them and ignore the call and expectation of believers to press on and take hold of what is promised in Christ.
- Sometimes the things that lie behind us in our past become a distraction and keep us from wholeheartedly following after Christ. These could be good or bad things. When Christians dwell on the past, those memories can cloud our vision of what God has in store for us based on the teaching of His Word and the leading of the Spirit. Focusing on our past before Christ could sidetrack us with guilt, shame, and embarrassment. Focusing on a future apart from Christ could waylay us with anxiety, fear, or puzzlement. But when we look upward to Christ, we are beckoned onward with hope and joy.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 40).

Sanctification: Scripture speaks of sanctification as a present **position** (we have already been sanctified) and as a continuing **process**. Sanctification affects the whole of a person, transforming one's heart, mind, and character to reflect that of **Jesus**.

Essential Doctrine “Sanctification”: After we are justified by faith, declared to be in right standing with God through the righteousness of Christ, we undergo a lifetime of sanctification where we are continually made more like Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26; 2 Thess. 2:13). Scripture speaks of sanctification as a present **position** (we have already been sanctified) and as a continuing **process**. Sanctification affects the whole of a person, transforming one’s heart, mind, and character to reflect that of **Jesus**.

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 40) to explain the prize we are to pursue—Christ and the resurrection from the dead.

What is the prize that believers are to pursue? In verse 8, Paul said he counted everything as a loss so he might gain Christ! In verse 11, he wants to experience the resurrection of the dead unto eternal life. Are these competing goals? No, they are one common prize for those who run and persevere in the race. If Christ has taken hold of us, then we should run hard to meet Him, and if Christ has been resurrected, then we too will be resurrected in Him. To gain Christ is to gain His resurrection and every other promise.

- The goal of Christ and the resurrection vividly displays why the race of the Christian life involves more than the power and effort we could put in personally. We could never take hold of Christ on our own because of our sin, and we have no power within ourselves to raise ourselves from the dead. Apart from Christ, this race and reaching our goal would be impossible.
 - The power to run and persevere in the race cannot come from us but must come from God. The power of God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit makes possible our salvation and sanctification (Phil. 2:12-13) and strengthens us for the ministry of the gospel (Col. 1:29; 1 Pet. 4:11).
 - Even our motivation for running comes through the power of God. God’s grace has started and sustained us in this race so that we can forget what is behind and press forward. His sure promise of the final resurrection and eternal life for those who believe in Jesus also drives us forward. As Paul said, because Jesus has taken hold of us we run to take hold of His promises. In this we confirm our calling and glorify God as the source of every part of the Christian life (2 Pet. 1:3-11).
-

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



What are some ways we can work, in the power of God, to take hold of Christ and His promises? (pray for God’s direction and strength to obey; vigorously strive to root out sin in our lives; proclaim the gospel to unbelievers; serve the church; act with compassion; seek justice; forgive as we have been forgiven by Christ)

Point 3: Run the race with victory in mind (Phil. 3:15-21).

READ Philippians 3:15-21 (DDG p. 41).

¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 41) to explain Christian maturity and its connection with a mind set on the second coming of Christ and the future resurrection.

The Christian life expects the believer to grow in maturity. This is more than making the Law of Moses a checklist for obedience or the means for attaining perfection. Rather, Christian maturity involves seeing all things in the light of Jesus Christ and His cross. A mind focused on the temporary things of this world reveals immaturity, if not unbelief. But a mind focused on eternal things—our coming Savior and the resurrection He will bring with Him—reveals the maturity and health of a believer.

- In the context of Philippians, Paul was warning believers not to stray toward false teachings that directed their focus and energies on earthly things (v. 19). As Christians, we must run the race with the proper mind-set as we press on toward the finish line. This doesn't mean ignoring and forsaking life on this earth. We are not called to asceticism, attempting to withdraw from the world. Rather, we live in the world but not of it; we take all the joys of the world God created and live in a manner worthy of our Creator.

Application: "Older" Christian doesn't automatically mean "mature" Christian. Old age doesn't necessarily make a person more faithful or more godly. Hence, it is for good reason that Paul, in this passage, encourages Christians to grow in Christian maturity, to press on toward Christ by imitating him (v. 17). We need more men and women who are willing to grow old, not just in age but in maturity. We need to model what Christian adulthood looks like to younger generations. This idea of growing old is not only good but essential in the church and our ministry. Believers must move from immaturity to maturity, going from milk to meat (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12; 1 Pet. 2:2). Maturing and growing older is a biblical metaphor for our spiritual health (1 Cor. 14:20; Gal. 4:1-3).

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 41).

Glorification refers to the **future** time when a Christian reaches moral and spiritual **perfection** at the time of death or at Christ's return. Glorification also involves the physical perfection that we will have once our bodies have been **resurrected**.

Essential Doctrine “Glorification”: Glorification is the final stage in the process of salvation. It refers to the **future** time when a Christian reaches moral and spiritual **perfection** at the time of death or at Christ's return (Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:22). Glorification also involves the physical perfection that we will have once our bodies have been **resurrected**. When we are glorified, we will have a fuller knowledge and understanding of God and His Word (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 13:12).

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 41) to show how the future resurrection for believers should impact their present-day lifestyle.

Living with the future resurrection in view impacts our present-day lifestyle. Those who ignore the future coming of Christ fail to recognize their coming destruction in hell and so continue unabated in their sin. Believers who live with their minds set on the second coming have a vision of their future resurrection in Christ, which motivates their pursuit of that promise. In Christ, the victory has been won, so we can run the race with confidence in our completion (Phil. 1:6)

- Enemies of the cross of Christ live an idolatrous, shameful lifestyle and live for earthly things rather than what is eternal. They love the things that God hates and hate the things that God loves. These people aren't in danger of losing reward in heaven but in danger of hell. They do not know God.
 - Paul's call for his readers to imitate him in the Christian life should not be misunderstood as Paul being boastful and egotistical about his walk with the Lord. Paul was clear about his status as a believer striving for the goal of perfection but not yet having arrived (3:12). Still, he recognized that his life was a good example of what it means to follow Christ because he aimed to imitate Christ Himself (see 1 Cor. 11:1). As Christians who are maturing in the faith, each of us ought to be able to say the same thing.
-

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



Who are some people you could imitate so as to mature in your faith? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

My Mission

EXPLAIN: Running the race of the Christian life begins with believing God sent His Son into the world to die on the cross for your salvation. But He doesn't just love you; God loves the whole world in this way (John 3:16). The gospel is for all nations and all people. There are a lot of people who do not know about God's love, and a lot of these people live right around you and me. If we are to run our race well, this gospel of Jesus Christ will change us to be more like Jesus and motivate us to share this good news with the world around us. May we live in light of the glorious truth of the gospel and be transformed by it everyday.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 42), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God's Word.

Because Jesus fixed His sight on the victory that awaited Him, we persevere, fixing our gaze on the hope that one day we will be glorified with Him.

- **How will you reorder your goals because of the salvation Christ won for us on the cross?**
- **What are some ways your group can help one another persevere and mature in the race of the Christian life?**
- **What specific steps will you take to confront enemies of the cross and call them to faith and obedience to Jesus Christ?**



Voices from Church History

"There may be sins within your heart that have long resisted control. Do with them as you will, they still defy you. But be of good cheer. What you cannot do, Jesus can. Hand them over to Him; He will bring them under His strong, subjecting hand. So with other difficulties in your life. The raising of a noble nature and character within you; the calling of souls, by your voice, from the death of sin, to a life of righteousness."²

—F. B. Meyer (1847-1929)

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, You are holy, majestic, and glorious; even our righteous acts are like polluted garments before You. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to do what we could never do for ourselves: obey You completely and atone for our sins. Help us never to presume that we are already perfect but rather to continue making every effort through the Holy Spirit to take hold of the prize of our heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the **Daily Study** devotions in their DDG (pp. 43-45), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use **Encourage One Another** (p. 46) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God's Word.

Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The **Daily Study** devotions in the DDG (pp. 43-45) will help group members get into God's Word and study it for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 46) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 43-45) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for **Day 3** as a part of point 2 in the session: **Suffering is an opportunity to know Christ better. Focus entirely on knowing Him and fulfilling His will for your life and you will know the greatest joy in all the world.**



Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God's Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 1:** "If Jesus, who is equal with God, was willing to live selflessly to serve sinful man, how much more should we be willing to do the same!"
- **Day 4:** "The salvation Christ gives us includes a glorified body in resurrection when we're finally conformed to His image."



Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God's Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member's DDG (p. 46) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using *The Gospel Project* in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to share transparently about where they could use some help in staying on pace in the race of the Christian life.**
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.

Additional Commentary

Point 1: Run the race without hindrances (Phil. 3:7-11).

“Immediately after presenting the portrait of himself as a Pharisee to show that he looked better than others *in the flesh* (3:4-6), Paul juxtaposes a strikingly different self-portrait (3:7-11) to demonstrate that he now considers even his most valuable assets in the flesh to be liabilities in the light of his knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. He even considers his extraordinary achievement of a faultless record of righteousness based on the law (3:6) to be worthless in contrast to the righteousness that comes from God (3:9). As he describes his own personal experience of new life in Christ, Paul provides a theological outline of the entire scope of salvation in Christ: justification, receiving righteousness from God by faith in Christ (v. 9); sanctification, knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection and participation in his sufferings (v. 10); and glorification, attaining to the resurrection from the dead (v. 11).”³

“Paul explicitly stated that this righteousness comes to people *from* God and *based on that faithfulness*. Paul rejected his own faithfulness to the law, realizing it was insufficient. His hope was the faithfulness of Christ. This verse, then, brings a knowledge of how God makes his righteousness available: It is through Jesus’ faithfulness and a person’s total reliance on him. The passage further contrasts Christ and the law. Paul never spoke against the law. Rather, he spoke about the individual’s inability to keep it. In this text he contrasted two means of coming to God: by works and by grace. If one chooses works, the law sets the standards and determines the success of that endeavor. Paul had tried that and found it unacceptable. If one chooses grace, Christ’s life and death become the hope. Paul found grace and faith to be the only way to have fellowship with God. Grace means that persons cast themselves on the mercy of God, trusting that what Jesus did will be applied to them. Grace freed Paul from self-effort to *gain* salvation and enabled him to devote himself to the things that *follow* salvation. The problem with the false teachers Paul countered was that they had not learned what Paul had learned.”⁴

Point 2: Run the race, pressing forward toward the goal (Phil. 3:12-14).

“Paul insists that he hasn’t arrived at the glorious goal; true maturity means knowing that you must still keep pressing on forwards towards the goal (3:12-13). He urges the Philippians to follow his example rather than that of his opponents, ‘enemies of the cross’ (3:18-19). As Messiah-people, his hearers are already citizens of heaven (3:20). This doesn’t mean ‘so you are looking forward to going back there’; as they would know, being citizens of Rome didn’t mean retiring to the mother city one day, but being agents of Roman civilization where they were.”⁵

“There is a ‘not yet’ aspect to the Christian life, which Paul acknowledges: *Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it (3:13)*. We are not yet complete. We have not yet reached our destination. To claim that we have shows a lack of humility. But we also should not dwell on our past. Paul ignores his past successes and failures as he presses forward expectantly to reach the goal (3:13-14). Our Lord, too, does not dwell on our past failures or successes. He wants us to keep moving forward by having faith in him until the day of victory. A mark of a Christian is keeping on towards the goal, trusting in the Lord despite the circumstances. A Christian is like a runner who looks forward to crossing the finishing line.”⁶

Point 3: Run the race with victory in mind (Phil. 3:15-21).

“The last part of chapter 3 concerns Paul as a model who has ‘live[d] up to what we have already attained’ (3:16-17). This exhortation probably includes imitating Paul’s identity as one who participates in eschatological suffering and in the inaugurated form of resurrection (3:10). The Philippians must continue to persevere in their faith and eradicate false teaching. The false teaching at Philippi is first and foremost concerned with earthly things, probably manifesting itself in imposing idolatrous dietary regulations on the Gentiles (‘their god is their stomach’ [3:19; cf. Mark 7:19; Rom. 16:18]). Since the Christians at Philippi have been spiritually raised with Christ, they must ‘eagerly await a Savior *from there*’ (Phil. 3:20; cf. Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1). The believers at Philippi must be so attuned to their resurrected identity in Christ that they eagerly await their physical resurrection that will occur at Christ’s second coming at the very end of history. When Christ returns, he promises to ‘bring everything under his control’ and ‘transform our lowly bodies’ to a body ‘like his glorious body’ (Phil. 3:21) ... At the end of the age, Christ will complete the process of creating his people in his end-time image, when he will transform believers into his image as the last Adam (cf. Rom. 8:29). The followers of Christ become conformed to the image of their Lord on an initial, spiritual level when they trust in him and then on a consummate, spiritual and physical level at the resurrection.”⁷

“Paul exhorted the **mature** (lit ‘perfect’). The use of the same root word in v. 12 reveals that Paul addressed the false teachers who claimed perfection. **Think this way** is ‘value’ (cp. 2:1-11; 3:15). **Live up to** means to walk in order, in rank like a soldier. **Whatever truth we have attained** is what brought previous success in Christian living.”⁸

References

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 34.
2. F. B. Meyer, quoted in *Record of Christian Work*, vol. XX, ed. W. R. Moody (East Northfield, MA: W. R. Moody, 1901), 313.
3. G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) [Logos].
4. Richard R. Melick Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1991) [Logos].
5. N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 446.
6. Eshetu Abate, “Philippians,” in *Africa Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1472.
7. G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *The Story Retold: A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 300-301.
8. Richard R. Melick Jr., “Philippians,” in *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2017), 1888, n. 3:15-16.