

**Philippians 3:12-14 (1984 NIV)**  
***Pressing On, Moving Forward***

**Introduction**

Entering into a new year poses different opportunities and challenges to different people. Nevertheless, what is common is the desire to have a sense of not merely moving into but more importantly, moving on/forward.

As we are about to end an old year and begin a new one, the Lord has placed in my heart to share with you some thoughts from Phi. 3:12-14.

I visited Israel one time. If you are a Christian, you cannot be in Israel just for holiday. It is a precious opportunity to discover and learn about the historical roots of your Christian faith.

One of the places we visited was the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem. It houses the personal collections of a Jewish man residing in Canada—Elie Borowski. Devastated by the loss of his family during the Holocaust, he felt the need for an awakening of moral and spiritual values contained in the Scripture. He believed the most effective way to reach this goal was to assemble a collection of artefacts from the Lands of the Bible that would confirm and clarify the riches of the biblical world with its ethics and spirituality.

Over the years, Borowski put together a choice collection of objects—ancient documents, idols, coins, statues, weapons, pottery, and seals from across the ancient Near East. Each of these documents some event or person, or interprets some story or custom of the biblical ancient past.

On 11 May 1992, the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem was opened, exhibiting the lifetime collections of Elie Borowski.

When we were there, we were given a “Christian Tour” of the museum. Using some of the exhibits displayed there, the guide reconstructed for us God’s redemption story from the time of Abraham to the time of the Roman Empire. It was amazing how God’s redemption story came to life through these exhibits.

We heard of how many Jewish survivors of the Holocaust were so traumatized that they lost the resolve to live—they committed suicide sometime later after the war. But Borowski, who was the sole family survivor in the Holocaust, was able to overcome his tragedy and rebuild not only his life, but also keep alive his faith in the spiritual ethics and values of Scripture.

And he was able to do that because he did not live in the past, but pressed on and moved forward into the future.

I believe this is also the personal motivation of Paul as we read his words in our text today.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible\\_Lands\\_Museum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_Lands_Museum))

If we want to get off to a good start as we prepare to enter a new year, we need to begin right. Our text today helps us at the level of personal motivation. And this personal motivation first entails ...

### **I. A Humble Evaluation (v. 12)**

Paul opened with a disclaimer. The disclaimer is simply that he had not yet been made perfect—"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect" (v. 12a).

The point that Paul was making is that there was still room for him to grow in his relationship with God. He had not yet arrived.

Ironically, when Paul was an unconverted Jew, he actually thought he had arrived spiritually.

However, Paul's encounter with the risen Christ opened his eyes to the fact that he had not arrived at all. In fact, he was not furthering the cause of God, opposing it. He had not arrived; he was not even on the right path. He was going in the wrong direction!

It was only when he came to faith in Christ that he moved on the right path and direction. But he also realized that he had not yet arrived, and that there was a difficult journey ahead that required perseverance and discipline.

What a change we see in Paul. Despite having met the Lord on the Damascus Road; despite having preached across the eastern Mediterranean region; despite being an apostle called by the Lord; despite writing letters inspired by the Holy Spirit; despite all that he had endured, he would now refuse to brag about anything he had done. In fact, the only thing he wanted to probably brag about was that he was in chains for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was believed to be in prison for this as he wrote his letter to the Philippians.

I think if I use these credentials of Paul, I could easily land myself in some big-time church today. But in realizing that he had not yet arrived, Paul recognized that what might impress men often would not impress God. It was true then. It is still very much true today.

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A fraud investigations firm in the US (Diligentia Group) once reported a case of false credentials. The culprit was an ordained pastor of a church in Pennsylvania. He claimed to have served with the elite Navy SEAL during the Vietnam War.

In order to perpetuate the fraud, he carried around the gold Trident medal awarded to those who have completed Navy SEAL training. He had actually bought it at an army surplus store. He also had a plaque at home that honoured his service as a Navy SEAL member. This was made by his sons.

After some years of telling and living this lie, this pastor felt the conviction of the Lord to come clean. He admitted his wrongdoing and said that it was all an “ego-builder” for him.

(<http://www.diligentiagroup.com/background-investigations/how-to-avoid-being-taken-by-fake-military-credentials>)

People can be tempted to fake credentials in order to impress others that they have arrived.

However, Paul was never embarrassed to acknowledge that he had not yet arrived. Paul recognized that what might impress men often would not impress God. The converse is also true—what might be despised by men would often be mightily used by God. That’s why all his past credentials before his conversion and all his attainments as a preacher of the Gospel mattered little to Paul.

He knew that he’s a sinner saved by grace. In another place he even called himself the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). Despite all that he had done, he made no claim of being perfect or having arrived in his own spiritual journey.

There will be no getting better until you admit you have much to grow to be better.

You can’t get better until you come to grips with reality. I mean ...

- It’s hard to admit your marriage is in trouble.
- It’s hard to admit your career is on shaky ground.
- It’s hard to admit your children are rebelling.
- It’s hard to admit you’ve got a critical spirit.
- It’s hard to admit you’re filled with anger.

But there is no getting better until you admit you have much to grow to be better; until you say, “It is what it is.” Only then can we move on by God’s grace.

Notice that Paul plainly says, “I have not yet obtained.” One translation says, “I do not claim that I have already succeeded.” That’s always a danger, especially for those who consider themselves “mature” Christians. It’s easy to look down on the struggles of others and say, “I thank you, Lord, that I am not like that man.”

It’s easy to become insensitive to sin because you think you are above it. Our repenting is tinged with pride—“Look at me! I’m honest enough to repent of my sins. I’m not like you. I don’t cover things up.” Sin is so much with us that even our repentance contains within it the seed of our next transgression.

Were it not for grace, none of us could ever stand before the Lord. The only way to become more like Christ is to press on in this commitment, yet always depending on His grace to help us.

And having disclaimed that he had already arrived, Paul went on to make a declaration—“But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (v. 12b).

The declaration is that he was pressing on to get everything that Christ desired to give him. It is sad that many realize they have not yet gained all that Christ has for them, but give up the pursuit.

If you are committing yourself to follow Christ in your coming days, then press on and show it in ...

- Your lifestyle
- Your obedience
- Your service
- Your attitude
- Your behaviour
- Your motives

You may not reach perfection overnight in all these areas. But by pressing on, you can make progressive growth in the character of Christ in you.

If we want to get off to a good start as we prepare to enter a new year, we need to begin right with our personal motivation. This first entails a humble evaluation of where we are—that we have not yet arrived. Next, it entails

## II. A Hearty Determination (v. 13)

Paul says in v. 13—“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.”

If we are going to press on towards the goal before us, then we cannot keep looking behind. That is why Paul tells us that we must be “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead”. Just what is “behind” that we are to forget? I would be inclined to think of two categories:

- Things from our pre-Christian past
- Things from our past as believers

First, let’s consider the things of our pre-Christian past. When Paul came to faith in Jesus Christ, he realized that all of the things in which he had boasted were really “dung”. He also realized that in persecuting the saints he had been opposing his Lord. Paul would certainly not wish to cling to the past in terms of these “accomplishments” because they were not accomplishments at all, spiritually speaking. But he also needed to accept the fact that when he came to faith in Christ, he became “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), and that the guilt of his past had been washed away by the blood of Christ. Thus, there would be no great benefit for him to agonize over his pre-Christian past. Paul must trust that God in His sovereignty had even used his wicked deeds against the saints for His own good purpose.

Second, let’s consider the things of our Christian past. If we are to fix our eyes on what lies ahead, then we cannot be obsessed with anything in our past, even our past as believers. Let me suggest some of the things in this category that we should “forget”.

- We should forget the sins and failures of our past in the sense that we do not let these haunt us with never-ending guilt and shame. But we must first have dealt with these issues. Restitution should be made. Confession should be made. Reconciliation should be sought. Lessons should be learned. Changes should be made. And once we have done these, we should leave them and move on. Having dealt with the past, we should not let it hinder our walk and journey with the Lord in the days ahead. There are things in our past that are already washed away by the redeeming blood of Christ. So, we leave them with the Lord and bear them no more.

Paul had a past that would be haunting to say the least. Before Paul had his life-changing encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, he was Saul the persecutor of the church. The only goal that Paul had was to wipe out Christianity and he was doing a good job. But he was changed by Christ and would never be the same again. Paul would now view his previous life as rubbish. Paul moved beyond his past and

we too need to do the same. There is no way for us to do great things for God while we are still wrapped up in the past.

Like Paul, we are no longer rubbish to be cast away by God no matter how wayward we have been, but we are now precious clay to be fashioned in the Potter's hands by His grace.

- We should forget what is behind by forgiving the hurts/wrongs done to us. We hear the term “forgive and forget”, but can we really forget? Is such forgetting just a wish that there's a delete button to remove all memories of the hurts/wrongs done to us?

The key to understanding biblical “forgetting” lies in the way God “forgets our sins and remembers them no more” (Jer. 31:34). Have you ever wondered how does an omniscient God who knows all things all the time can “forget” or “remember no more”? Consider these verses that tell us God ...

- Remembered Noah (Gen. 8:1).
- Remembered Abraham (Gen. 19:29).
- Remembered Rachel (Gen. 30:22).

In each incident, God remembering someone meant He was about to do something—He was about to act on someone's behalf. If God remembering means He is about to act, then God forgetting means that He is not going to act. When God forgets our sins, it means He chooses not to act on them because He has forgiven us.

In the same way, while we cannot forget the wounds of our past, we can still “forget” in the sense that we choose not to act on them. Instead, we choose to forgive the person who has hurt us, and not allow the memory to control our lives.

Paul wrote in Phi. 3:13—“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead ...” What did Paul have to forget? He had been unjustly beaten with rods, flogged with whips, pelted with stones, locked in prison, persecuted by fellow Jews, and threatened by Gentiles he was trying to help. He often went without food, without clothes, and without a pillow on which to lay his head (2 Cor. 11:23–29).

And yet, Paul essentially said, “I let it go so I can move on to something better.”

When Paul talks about “forgetting what is behind”, he does not mean that he somehow deleted the past from his memory. Instead, he made a conscious refusal to let the past absorb his attention and hinder his progress. He didn't allow the past to paralyze his potential for the future.

Instead, he used the past to fuel his faith as he moved towards what lie ahead.

Yes, I do remember some wounds from my past, but I can honestly say I no longer act on them. When I remember, I don't feel the resentment, bitterness, or shame of my early years. My past no longer controls me because the memories have so little power over my actions and emotions today.

This is how I “forget” what is behind and recall how God has redeemed my story at the same time. I trust the Lord's love to heal my past hurt and pain.

Indeed, we need to learn to forgive those who have sinned against us, and to leave their offenses behind us (Eph. 4:32). Bitterness is the lingering hostility that results when sins against us are not forgiven and left behind. In other words, “forgetting what is behind” is to be understood like this—“Having forgiven the offender, I now leave behind the offense, and do not allow it to arouse bitterness in me even if it may come to mind from time to time.”

- We should forget our apparent successes in the past by not glorifying in and resting on them complacently. How easy it is to rest on our laurels and to dwell upon past successes. We cannot look back if we are going to press on. We do not win races by looking backward but by focusing forward on the finish line.

The imagery that Paul uses here is actually one of a runner. Not just any runner but the lead runner. The lead runner needs to forget those who are behind him and focus on the remainder of the race that lies ahead. The same is true of our Christian race.

We are called to run our Christian race as one in the lead and not one who's playing catch-up. The winning runner is not one who is always looking at the field he leaves behind, but one who is always looking ahead to the finishing line. In the same way, we are called to live the Christian life focused not on what we have left behind but on what we have yet to embrace at victory's end.

We are called to forget what is behind—an act that will help us not to be stuck in our failures with dejection, or in our wounds with bitterness, or in our successes with complacency. The implication is that we are to press on and move on; not crying over spilt milk, or licking old wounds, or resting on laurels.

Thus Paul calls us to “strain toward what is ahead”. Paul is simply stating that our relationship with Christ here on earth is not yet perfect. If we are honest, we all have areas that need the perfecting love of God. We all have struggles that keep us from enjoying our relationship with God. Hence the reason to strain towards what is ahead is to be closer and closer to God with each passing day. And this is possible through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. The abundant life that Scripture talks about is not only about outward blessings that overflow into our lives. It is also about our Spirit-filled lives overflowing out with the fruit of the Spirit to bless others.

When Paul calls us to forget, he is not talking of a kind of forgetting that chains us to some demented pattern of living. Rather, he is talking of a deliberate act that is divinely enabled so that we become free to live a lifestyle that pushes us onward and moves us forward spiritually.

Paul could have said, “There are 101 things I can do to grow in Christlikeness.” But he did not say that. Instead he stressed, “There is ONE thing I do—forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.”

Indeed, learn well from our past. Yet let the past not be our master, but our servant to help us press on and move forward into the future.

If we want to get off to a good start as we prepare to enter a new year, we need to begin right at the level of personal motivation. It entails a humble evaluation to recognize that we are not there yet, and a hearty determination not to be chained to the past so that we can move unhindered and boldly into the future. Lastly, it entails ...

### **III. A Heavenly Inclination (v. 14)**

Paul says in v. 14—“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

There have always been those who want others to believe that they have already arrived spiritually. If they could, they would have us believed that they live above the struggles, temptations, and trials of this life. Thus they are not open and transparent about their struggles and failures in their Christian life. They would be very reluctant to admit their failings, and some would even deny that they sin any longer.

Paul does call upon his readers to follow his example, but he does not do so by claiming to have already arrived. Paul calls upon us to follow his example in striving towards the goal of maturity in Christ. Paul is not a man who has arrived. Rather, Paul is on the pathway, pressing onward towards maturity, and urging us to join him in this pursuit of maturity in Christ.

Paul's words were intended to correct an error known as "perfectionism". In its simplest form, perfectionism is the belief that one can arrive at perfection in this life. I've never really known a person who has arrived in this sense. But I have known people who think that they have arrived because they esteem themselves as much further down the path of perfection than others.

Paul is absolutely emphatic about the fact that he has not yet arrived. However, he presses on in the direction of obedience. In the spiritual life, direction makes all the difference. True believers aren't in heaven yet, but they aim their steps in that direction.

Paul said, "I haven't arrived yet, but I'm still pressing on!" If he were here today, he would say, "Press on! It's not enough to start well. You also have to end well."

The key is to begin—start small because all changes begin with the first, small steps. All significant changes start with key questions like:

- What am I going to do to draw closer to Christ this year?
- How is the fruit of the Spirit being exhibited in my life thus far?

And we change not merely for the sake of changing, but as an expression of our desire to press on in answering God's heavenward call for us in Jesus Christ.

And what is this heavenward call? Simply put, it is the call to live with eager anticipation of knowing Christ fully and fellowshiping with Him perfectly when we meet Him face-to-face in His time.

When Iris and I were about to leave Israel and fly back home, we told our girls that there was no need for them to be at the airport. It would be quite late. We told them to wait for us at home.

When we eventually touched down at Changi Airport and went to the arrival hall, guess who we saw outside the gate? Well, it was our two girls.

Were we angry that they didn't obey our instruction? Of course not! Instead, we were very glad to see them. Perhaps that's a mutual feeling—we wanted to see one another sooner at the airport rather than wait to see one another later at home.

That is also the way it should be with respect to our heavenward call. We should be pressing towards it (rather than be passive about it) in that we should have this eager anticipation to meet our Lord even though it will be in His time, not our time.

How can we show this eager anticipation to meet our Lord even though it will be in His time?

Like Paul, we show this by making a commitment to no longer be chained to our past. Like Paul, we show this by living with a glorious future in mind. Paul was focused on the day that Jesus completes His work in him.

The power of the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to live a redeemed life. The Spirit gives us the ability to become more and more like Christ. The truth is so amazingly simple, yet we often settle for less. Why is this so? Because we often allow ourselves to be conformed to the things of the world and not to be transformed by the work of the Spirit in us.

Do you know the work that the Lord has in and through us is not done until we die or He returns? We press on because the unfinished work of Christ in our lives calls us to pursue a forward focus intensely set on being perfect in heaven. And this forward journey begins now as we daily work at speaking, acting, thinking, feeling, and seeing more and more like Christ.

Like Paul, we are to press on for it helps us to overcome the past. We can do nothing about yesterday—it ended last night. So don't waste time and energy looking back. Put the effort into changing today. Put the energy into being more like Christ today. The call of God is to change, to grow, and to progress in the faith. Stop looking back and start looking ahead.

When famed missionary Dr. David Livingstone returned from Africa to England, he was asked, "Where are you ready to go next?"

"I am ready to go anywhere," he replied, "provided it is forward."

This must be the attitude of the child of God every single day.

([https://www.preceptaustin.org/philippians\\_314](https://www.preceptaustin.org/philippians_314))

I think many people make their "do and wish" list and say, "Lord, if you don't mind, I am busy today so could you just initial at the bottom of my 'do and wish' list, and I won't bother you anymore." But that's not how it works. The "secret" of knowing and doing God's will begins when you say, "Lord, let me take the next step with you today. Let me do your work and wish your will be done."

## Conclusion

If we want to get off to a good start as we prepare to enter a new year, we need to begin right. Our text helps us at the level of personal motivation. And this personal motivation entails ...

- A humble evaluation—that we have not yet arrived.
- A hearty determination—that we do not let the past (good or bad) keep us from pressing on and moving forward.
- A heavenly inclination—that we press on to grow to be more and more like Christ so that we will not be ashamed when we meet Him face-to-face.

Yes, we'll have our share of challenges as we prepare to enter a new year. But I pray that God's promise of never leaving or forsaking us would spur us to press on and move forward in the days ahead as a Christian and as a church. Amen!