

Pressing Toward the Resurrection

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Philippians 3:4b-14 NIV

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11).

How strange these words must sound to us, in the aftermath of Easter! We're passing through that season known as Eastertide, the continuing celebration of our Lord's resurrection from the dead. What an astounding and mysterious event — the resurrection of Jesus! We can't comprehend such a thing, that a man should rise from the dead and so be vindicated as the Christ of God, the long-awaited Messiah and deliverer of God's people! It defies our understanding, we can't get our minds around it, it doesn't fit into our scientific and technological worldview, it bursts the bounds of our logic! Yet our Lord's victory over death is the core of our faith. The glorious resurrection of Christ holds the power and promise of victory over death for all who belong to him. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:17-26).

Yes, it's through Christ that we become overcomers of death, "more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). Through baptism we're united with him in his death, in order to be united with him also in his resurrection from the dead. Our resurrection depends on Jesus' resurrection — about this the Scriptures are clear! As Paul says, "Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him."

So it does seem odd when Paul turns around and says, "*I press on* to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me . . . and so, somehow, to *attain to the resurrection* from the dead." If it's through *Jesus'* resurrection that *we* are raised — indeed, if Jesus Christ *is* our resurrection — how can we ever think of *pressing on* toward the resurrection, or of *attaining* it? Isn't the resurrection something we will experience simply because of our trust in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, and our membership in him?

Yes, our resurrection is bound up with Jesus' resurrection. As Jesus says, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:9). But, as with so much in the Scriptures, there's more than one way to look at it. Sometimes we treat the Bible as though it were the answer key to some sort of multiple choice test, where there's only one right answer. But that's to superimpose our Western logic on the Bible — a rational approach that developed in the seventeenth century along with modern science. That point of view wasn't around when the biblical authors did their work, and they think in a different way. Just as the Lord says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8), so biblical logic isn't like our logic. When we think things through, we go from point A to point B to point C in a chain of cause and effect. Biblical arguments aren't like that. In biblical logic, you approach a subject first this way, then that, and from as many angles as possible, till you have surrounded it with talk. Then, whoever is left standing at the end of this talkathon wins the argument! If you don't believe me, read the Book of Job. Job's friends, and then Elihu, offer some very good arguments about why Job is suffering, and eventually they just talk the subject to death. But Job isn't convinced till God shows up and says pretty much what some of the other speakers have already said. *Then* Job repents — not because of *what* God says but because it's God who says it! In the Bible, an argument is won by the person with the most powerful voice.

The resurrection is the heart of our Christian faith. In 1 Corinthians, Paul relates it to Jesus' victory over death, a victory we share with him if we're united with him. In Colossians 3:1, Paul proclaims that we've already been raised with Christ. But here, in Philippians, Paul takes a look at the resurrection from yet another angle — as something we need to strive for, to attain. In the New Testament there's always this "now but not yet" aspect to our salvation. We've been saved through Jesus' work on the cross, yet we still have to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). And "pressing on" toward the resurrection from the dead is part of that process, as we progress toward mature manhood, "to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" as he says in Ephesians 4:13. The resurrection is a journey, and Paul is asking, "Are we there yet?"

So, how are we supposed to "press on" toward the resurrection from the dead? Paul gives us some clues to his thinking in our passage from Philippians 3:

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:8-11).

There are two clues here. First, Paul speaks of *sharing in the sufferings of Christ*. It was through the cross that Jesus came to the resurrection, and Paul is saying that's the way to resurrection for Jesus' followers as well. Nobody wants to suffer, and you and I spend a lot of time and effort trying to avoid suffering — going to doctors, taking medication, strengthening our job skills, guarding our finances, planning for retirement, seeking relief from difficult circumstances. It's not wrong to avoid *needless* suffering, especially when we have a God who wants to heal us and pour out his abundance into our lives! But Paul is speaking of a particular kind of suffering, a suffering modeled on that of Christ, and that is *suffering for our faith*.

The suffering the New Testament mentions is almost always *suffering because of persecution* in a culture hostile to the purposes of God. That kind of suffering is very real today, and there's no way to avoid it without compromising our beliefs and stepping back from our commitment to the Lord. Our world is full of movements opposed to the Christian faith, and some researchers have claimed that more Christians died for their faith during the twentieth century than during all previous centuries combined. You and I will probably not be called upon to die for our faith — to suffer as Jesus did — but if we stand for Christ and for biblical truth we may still have to pay a price in. People won't understand why we say what we say and do what we do, and they may consider us weird if not outright dangerous — just as some politicians consider a Christian believer appointed to our Federal courts to be a "danger" to our nation! But, says Paul, that's part of "pressing on" toward the resurrection from the dead.

Paul's second clue to the working out of our resurrection is found in a phrase from this passage: "that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ." For Paul it was *the law* that was the enemy of resurrection. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 3:7 he calls the law a "dispensation of death." Now, it wasn't the *moral code* of Moses that Paul was talking about, for in Romans 7:12 he says that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good." This "dispensation of death" was the way that holy law had been distorted into a system by which people thought they could prove to others, and to God, how good they were. Paul could have had a lot to be proud of in this respect, as he reminds us in our passage. That system was so powerful in New Testament times that people who were caught up in it had lost sight of God. And when Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, he threatened the system. So he had to be put to death by people who were more interested in protecting their self-image than in opening themselves to a fresh move of the Lord in their time. But, as Peter states in Acts 2:24, "God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."

So there's a direct connection between the resurrection and the law. If we want to understand what the resurrection means, we need to understand the "dispensation of death," the law that opposes it. This is clear from Paul's words in that wonderful chapter on the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). From Paul's words it's clear that our resurrection victory — the victory we have in Christ — is a *victory over the law*, and over its power to drive us into sinful separation from God.

How can we see this in our lives today? After all, we're not Jews and we don't have this complicated system of religious regulations that the Law of Moses had become in the first century. That system was part of the early Church's cultural environment, and the New Testament often refers to it, but where is it today for most of us?

I think that to see "the law" at work now we have to look for whatever fulfills its same function in our culture, and thus serves as the "dispensation of death," the enemy of resurrection. And truly, there is an oppressive law at work in our culture that works as the enemy of life and resurrection. It's the law of "the imperial self." It's the law, increasingly enforced by our highest courts, that says that a person can do whatever he wants to do with his own life and his own body. You can terminate the life of your fetus if you don't want the responsibility of bringing a child into the world. If you want to, you can engage in forms of sexuality for which the human body was never designed. You can dictate your own death if you become incapacitated and unable to care for yourself. You can force your way into a school even if you're not of the sex for which the school was originally established. In some schools, in fact, you can wear whatever you want to, or wear nothing at all. The list goes on. The law of our culture says that nothing can restrain the individual who wants to "be himself," even if in the process he destroys relationships, families and even other tiny lives. In fact, if you *don't* "have it your way," if you *don't* try to "be all you can be," if you fail to "look out for Number One," people think you're crazy. You shouldn't have to give way to anyone else, or let anyone else tell you what kind of person you ought to be.

What Paul is saying is that resurrection life comes when we break free from this law, this "ministration of death" that's all about *me* and never about *God*. A *me*-centered life is living death, by whatever "law" we follow. Deliverance from death comes from setting aside that self-centeredness, realizing our responsibility to others and to the Lord, and committing ourselves to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Or, as Paul says in chapter 2 of Philippians, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). In this way we live out our resurrection, as we "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). So we rejoice in the victory of our Lord over the powers of death, through which our resurrection has been won. But at the same time we understand that our resurrection is a journey, a lifelong pilgrimage. And, looking into our own lives, and our place in the community of faithful believers, we ask ourselves, "Are we there yet?"