

The Christian's Quest

- I. What are you counting on?
- II. What are you pressing toward?

(Philippians 3:7-14) But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. {8} 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 {9} 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. {10} 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, {11} and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. {12} 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. {13} 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, {14} I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Tell me, when you were a kid, did you have a favorite cartoon you liked to watch? Maybe it was Bugs Bunny or Tom and Jerry. Maybe it was The Flintstones or The Jetsons. Maybe it was Scooby-Doo or SpongeBob Square Pants. Those are all popular cartoons. But they aren't the one I would pick. My favorite cartoon, the one my brothers and I loved to watch with something called Jonny Quest. Anyone remember that cartoon? Race Bannon, Johnny, Haji, their dog Bandit. They were always on some kind of adventure in an exotic location, whether they were looking for a secret ray gun in the South Pacific Islands, or rescuing a fellow scientist held captive in the Amazon jungle or trying to thwart the plans of a mad scientist who wanted to take over the world. Johnny and his team were always on some kind of, well, some kind of...quest. I guess that's why it was called Jonny Quest.

Today, we continue our sermon series which bears the same name. Only in this case, it's not Jonny's Quest we're focused on. It's Jesus' Quest. During this season of Lent, we're focused on Jesus' lifelong mission to rescue fallen man from the effects of sin forever. It's a quest that Jesus was on that ultimately took him to the cross of Calvary. As the perfectly obedient Son of God, Jesus was determined to fulfill the mission his Father had given him to do. He was determined to accomplish his purpose in life.

The question is, could the same thing be said of you or me? If I were to ask you, "What do you think is the purpose of your life? What are you trying to accomplish during the time you're on this planet, what would you say?" Or to put it another way, if you were to define your life as a lifelong Quest, then exactly what would you say that you were looking for?

My friends, that's what we'd like to reflect on for a moment today. Today will focus on what we might call,

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And to help us focus on that concept, we turn to St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, where Paul, in effect, asks us two questions:

I. Christian, what are you counting on?

II. Christian, what are you pressing toward?

First, what are you counting on? If I were to ask you, “What do you hope to be the end result of the time you spend on this earth?” I think a lot of us would say, “I hope that I when I die, I’ll go to heaven. That’s what I’m shooting for. I hope to one day be in a better place.” You realize, that’s a natural desire built into the heart of every human being. It’s been said that ever since man was kicked out of Paradise, we’ve all been trying to get back to Paradise. The question is, How? How does a person get back to Paradise? What does a person need to do to make the grade? What should a person be counting on to be welcomed into heaven?

Well, you realize how the majority of people in our world would answer those questions. They’d say, “If you live a good life on this side of the grave, you’ll enjoy a better life on the other side of the grave. The more good things you do here on Earth, the better your chances of earning a reward in the Yonder.”

In fact, for years, that’s how the Apostle Paul thought. There was a time when Paul thought that as long as he did his best to keep every one of God’s Commandments, he was a shoe-in to get into heaven. You might say that if Paul were an accountant, adding up his personal balance sheet, he’d put on one side all his assets, all the things he figured earned him credit with God. In the verses prior to our text, Paul lists a few of those things. He says that 1. he was circumcised on exactly the eighth day, just as Jewish law prescribed. 2. He was from one of the most purebred tribes of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin. 3. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. In other words, he came from a long line of people who have remained faithful to their ancestral traditions. 4. He says, In regards to the law, he was a Pharisee. He could boast that he not only kept all of God’s law, he kept a bunch of extra laws, to boot. 5. As for zeal, he persecuted the church. Paul was so committed to his religion that he put to death those who opposed him. In Paul’s mind, these were all things that belonged in his “profit” column.

And then Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. And Jesus taught Paul two things that he never knew before. 1. God demands not just our best efforts at keeping his commandments. Rather, God demands perfection. 2. The perfection that God demands, perfection that no sinful human being can achieve, is the perfection that Jesus gives us as a free gift, purely by grace, through faith in him.

But here’s the catch. Those who think they deserve that gift, those who think that they earned their place in heaven by their own righteousness, will in fact lose the righteousness that Jesus offers them. It’s that fact that completely turned Paul’s thinking around. Suddenly all the things that Paul thought he had going for him, all the things that he was counting on to making right with God (for example, he was a purebred Jew, he kept all the laws, etc.) suddenly he realized all those things were not going to get him one step closer to heaven. In fact, he realized that trusting in those things were not to his gain. They were to his loss. In other words they didn’t belong in the profit column. They belonged in the loss column. That’s what Paul means when he writes here in our text, *Whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ*. In fact, he uses an even stronger word in verse 8. He says, *I consider them rubbish*, literally, garbage, even sewage. And why did Paul need to get rid of all that self-righteous garbage in his life? He says, *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*.

In other words, Paul recognized that all his qualifications were good for nothing. They all belong in the loss column. All that mattered for Paul was Christ and his righteousness. It’s Jesus’

perfect life, it's Jesus' sacrificial death that made Paul right with God. Christ Alone is all Paul needed to be welcomed into heaven. Christ Alone is all Paul was counting on.

The question is, what about you and me? In our quest to get into heaven, what are we counting on? Are there some things that we might add to the profit column of our balance sheet? Maybe: 1. I grew up in a Christian family. 2. I was confirmed in a Lutheran Church. 3. I've been a life-long WELS member. 4. I attend worship services on a regular basis. 5. I pray every day. Now, don't get me wrong. Are those all good things? Absolutely. Can they be considered blessings from God? Yes they can. But the minute I think that any of those things make me more acceptable to God, they become not good things, but bad things. If I'm going to count on those things to get me to heaven, I'd better put them not in the profit column, but rather in the loss column. That way I can see that what I really have is all I really need. And that's Jesus' righteousness. How did the hymn writer put it? "*Jesus, your blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress.*" Christ's righteousness is what allows us to stand before God on his throne. In Christ alone, my hope is found. Nothing else matters. In fact, that's why Paul says here in our text, *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

My friends, when you think about your Quest in life, when you think about what you hope to get out of life, when you think about what's most important to you in the time God has given you on this planet, think about what St. Paul was focused on. *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

In other words, the first and most important part of the Christian's Quest, the reason God put us on this planet is to come to know Christ. To know that his righteousness is your righteousness, that his resurrection guarantees your resurrection from the grave someday, to know that even the suffering you endure in life will not separate you from God, but can be used by God to keep you connected to Christ. That's what Saint Paul means when he describes his Christian quest with the words, *I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. (Philippians 3:10)*

But now maybe you are thinking, "Wait a minute. What if, by God's grace, I already know Christ? What if I know that I can't count on anything I've done for God, but only what God has done for me in Christ? Does that mean that my quest is over? I've already achieved God's purpose for my life?" No rather, it simply brings us to the second question related to the Christian's Quest, namely, II. Christian, now what are you pressing toward?

Here in our text, Paul anticipates that someone might ask the question, "Once a person knows Christ has won heaven for believers, then what?" Paul answers that question in terms of his life when he writes, *Not that I have already obtained all this* (in other words, it's not like I'm already in heaven) *or have already been made perfect*, (in other words, on this side of the grave, Paul admits that he still has sinful nature). But Paul goes on to say, *I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*

In other words, Christ has won eternal life for all of us. He stands at heaven's gate, holding this crown for each one of us. And while we can't do anything to win that crown, (it's already won for us). We can do plenty of things to lose that crown. For example, I might start to think that there are more important things in my life than my heavenly treasures. "I'd rather give my attention to my earthly treasures." Or maybe I start to get complacent about my spiritual life. "I know where I'm going when I die, so it doesn't matter how I live my life. I don't have to spend time in worship or the Word; I'll always be a believer." Or maybe we start looking back at our lives, whether we're taking pride in the good we have done or despairing over the evil things we

have done. Like a runner who keeps turning around to see where he has been, we stumble and never finish the race. That's why Paul says what he does here. *One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind* (both the things we're proud of and the things we aren't), *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.*

What is Paul saying? Is saying that even though as Christians, heaven is our home, the fact is, we're not there yet. Between now and then, we still have a race to run. But it's not a 40 yard dash. It's more like a Steeplechase. It's a long race with lots of obstacles to overcome, walls to climb and puddles to jump. So it is with our lives as Christians. Satan is going to put a lot of obstacles in our way because he wants to separate us from the finish line. He knows that if we finish our lives in faith, the eternal prize is ours. So he goes to work on us between now and then. He's going to tempt us to give up on the race. Tempt us to give in to our sinful nature. Tempt us to forget about what kind of people God has recreated us to be. That's why Paul says that we need to keep pressing on toward the goal. To do that, we need to keep feeding our faith with God's Word and Sacrament. We need to keep beating down our sinful nature with its selfish thoughts and cravings. All the while that recognizing, as the Bible says, "It is God who works in you to will and to do his good pleasure. In other words, God has the power to preserve each one of us all the way to the end of the race.

That, my friends is the Christian's Quest. It's our purpose in life. It's why God has put us on this planet. First to Know Christ, to know that we can count on his righteousness for our eternal life. And once we know Christ, our purpose, our quest is to Live for Christ, that is, to fight the good fight, and run the straight race, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, until that day when, by his grace, and in his mercy, we cross the finish line and fall into the arms of our Savior and Lord. God keep us in his grace until that glorious day. Amen.