

A NUGGET OF JOYFUL PERSEVERANCE

Philippians 3: 12 thru 4:1

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It's that time of year when football reigns across the landscape of America, whether it's high school, college, or professional. Everyone is encouraged to choose a favorite team and cheer them on. It gets so crazy in fact, that it's hard to turn on the TV without bumping into a game, especially on Saturdays and Sundays. Looking over the passage of Scripture that we will be focusing on this morning, I couldn't help but be reminded of our fascination with this national pastime. In fact, the game of football is an excellent illustration for helping us to understand what Paul was saying to the Philippians and what he is saying to us today. So let's put on our helmets, don our jerseys and head out onto the field of play. For each of us, everyone who calls themselves a Christian, is a member of God's team, playing a decisive contest on the field of life each and every day.

Now here's some things you need to know before we get started. The Lord Jesus Christ is our coach. He knows how the game of life is played. He Himself was a player once upon a time and He is well aware that you can get hurt on the gridiron. In fact, it cost Him His life when those Roman soldiers nailed Him to a cross. But that didn't stop Him and now He has returned to coach His team known as the Christians, a team that is playing their hearts out all across the globe. There's something else I need to share with you. Each of us who identifies ourselves as a follower of Christ, each of us has signed up through our profession of faith and through our initiation called baptism, is a member of His team. It doesn't matter how old we are, whether we're male or female, or how gifted we are spiritually. We are on Team Christian. With that in mind, let's see what Paul has to say to us.

Here's the first thing. Speaking of himself, but really of all of us, Paul declares, "I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be" (Holy Bible, New Living Translation, Philippians 3:12). What is Paul saying to us? Just imagine for a moment that you have signed up to play on the high school football team. The coach looks you over and sees a group of players who have a lot to learn. But he also sees something else. He sees the potential of whom you can become. He sees that one of you will be a great quarterback, another skilled tight end and another a tremendous defensive tackle. He sees what you are now, an inexperienced and inept group of amateurs, but he also looks into the future and sees something else, what you can become, a really great team of talented players.

His job as a coach is to take what you are and transform you into what he knows you can become. That's what Paul is talking about. He knew he hadn't arrived yet. He's was still in training. But he was striving to become all that he knew Coach Jesus wanted him to be. The same is true for you and me. When we join the team, when we become Christians, the Lord Jesus Christ looks us over and evaluates our potential, how we might prove to be beneficial to the work of His Kingdom here on earth. Then He begins the process of training us. He instructs us through that inner voice, the Holy Spirit.

Remember what Jesus told His disciples in the Gospel of John, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:16). His personal instruction plus His playbook, the Scriptures, enables us to become proficient as Christians and to hopefully receive recognition and maybe even reward when the game of life is over here on earth and we step into heaven. On that day, best of all hear these words from our coach, Jesus Christ, "Well done, I'm proud of you" or as is recorded in Matthew 25:21, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness!"

Here's something else we can learn from what Paul said to the Philippians and what he is saying to us today. In football language, he's telling us that when disagreements arise, we need to listen to the coach and pay attention to what the more experienced players on the team have to say. In his own words, Paul tells the Philippians, "If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you." Then he goes on to say, "Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example" (New Living Translation, Philippians 3:15 and 17). That's good advice on the playing field and in the church. God's Spirit is able to guide and direct us, especially when we listen to those Christians who are spiritually mature, those Christians who have been walking with the Lord for a long time. Let me share with you an example from another church many years ago. The leaders of the church, in this case the Board of Deacons, a group similar to our Session, was in the midst of a heated discussion. Some were saying one thing and others something else. Finally, the leader of the Deacons brought the discussion to an end. He said, "Ok men, we're obviously of not one mind and heart. We need to go home, seek a word from the Lord in the Scriptures and really pray about this. Then we'll meet together next week and see if we can come to an agreement." The Deacons listened to his wise counsel and did as he instructed. When they met the following week, they were of one mind regarding the situation which had created so much dissension. Personally, I've seen this approach to problem solving work over and over again in the life of a local church.

Finally, here's one final thing that Paul had to say and it comes as a warning. He writes, "For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ" (New Living Translation, Philippians 3:18). What were these people doing to bring forth such words of condemnation from Paul? They were claiming to be Christians, but living morally scandalous lives. It's an old problem that has eaten away at the heart of the Church almost from the beginning when our faith is not reflected in how we live out our lives. Let me share one brief example. A very large and growing church in Hampton Roads went bankrupt, their property sold for failure to pay the mortgage. Why? The moral misconduct of their pastor and the failure of the congregation to deal with the situation in a Christ honoring way. Sadly, those kinds of things have happened all too often and that's why Paul stressed that our conduct as Christians must reflect the Christian way of life, not the values and practices of the worldly and often pagan society in which we live.

Thankfully, Paul closes out chapter three by reminding us that we are citizens of heaven who are looking forward to Christ's return. When that happens He will be in charge and everything will be transformed, including you and me. We will be able to

trade in our old mortal bodies for glorious ones like His own. For many of us who daily face the restraints of limbs that don't work as well as they use to and ailments that restrict and keep us from enjoying our lives that will be a welcome relief. But what should we do until that day comes or until we are gathered unto the Lord at the end of our lives? The answer is simple. Perseverance! Never quitting, always striving to do and be our best, even when we're tired and weary—serving the Lord faithfully each and every day, never allowing a difference of opinion to divide us and never, never giving into the waywardness of the world.

One such Christian was a woman by the name of Eva Graham. She lived in a dilapidated house with a kitchen that was in the process of separating itself from the rest of her home. She also lived on one of the worst and most crime ridden streets in her community, Nevertheless, she opened her home to a Bible study that met every Tuesday morning and she was constantly encouraging her neighbors to come with her to church on Sundays. Finally, her son and daughter-in-law drove up from Florida and said, "Mom it's time for you to come and live with us." We knew that was the right decision for she was well up in years, but we also knew that we would miss her gentle, persistent reliance upon the Lord. On the last Sunday before her departure, she arrived at church with a little girl from the community, bringing her to Sunday school. Perseverance in the service of Christ. She knew the meaning of the word.

But how about joyful perseverance? Can you be joyful even when being perseverant is truly difficult and wearisome? Since I started with a football illustration, let me close with one. My friend in the ministry, Charles Page, was once a football coach. One day after practice he added something extra. He told the boys, "See that steep hill over there. We're going to climb it." You should have heard the grumbling and complaints. But when he set the example by leading the way, there was little else they could do but follow after him. Week after week they climbed that hill, the coach encouraging them to climb it faster and faster. Now it was the last game of the season and their team was behind. It had been a hard fought contest and they needed a touch down to win the game. They were on the five yard line of their opponent with just seconds remaining before the game would be over. Charles called a time out and gathered his team around him. He said, "Remember the hill. You've got to climb it just one more time. Go out there and do your best." The ball was snapped and here is what happened. Charles' team not only pushed the football into the end zone, they pushed it and the other team all the way to the back of the end zone. Not only is that perseverance, but on that night during the celebration that followed, it was joyful perseverance. I think that is what Paul was talking about when he concluded this part of his letter with these words, "Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends" (Philippians 4:1). Or as James so eloquently stated in his letter to fellow Christians, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him" (James 1:12). So put on your football jersey, strap on your cleats, grab your helmet and let's go out and win one for the Lord.