

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## **Arrested To Run** **Philippians 3:12-14**

**Intro:** In our last study of Philippians, we saw how Paul declared his desire to know Jesus. This knowledge doesn't just the intellectual contents of the mind but, in the biblical sense, its knowledge that's allowed to control the conduct of the individual who possesses it; it's a knowledge that's practiced in daily life. Paul not only desired to know Jesus to the point that it changed his behavior; he also wanted to know His power. More specifically, Paul wanted to know the power of His resurrection. Of course, it was divine power that raised Jesus up out of the tomb and, in a sense; Paul had experienced that power to a certain degree in his own life. Before he met Jesus, he was dead in trespasses and sin; after – he was spiritually alive.

But Paul's not just looking at the divine power behind the resurrection but at the power that resulted from it. The resurrection of Jesus is an evidencing power: it's the evidence and seal that everything Jesus did and said was true. It is a justifying power: it's the receipt and proof that the sacrifice of the cross was acceptable as payment in full. It's a life-giving power as those who are connected with Jesus receive the same resurrection life. Finally, it's a comforting power: it's a promise that our friends and family who died in Christ will live with Him. This is the power that Paul desired to experience and example through his life.

Paul desired that this power of the resurrection would be manifested in his life so much to the point that he would look like an already resurrected person to all those around him who were spiritually dead. Paul wanted others to see his life transformed by the power of Jesus Christ. This was not only something he desired; it was something he was striving to attain (11). Now, it's quite possible that Paul realized there would be some in Philippi, much like today, who would dismiss his words as something no Christian could possibly be expected to accomplish. They'd admit that the ideal was a good one, but they'd call it totally unpractical. Paul doesn't allow this kind of thinking to continue. He immediately adds that although he hasn't even realized this goal completely, he's still trying; and he implies that we should also be trying.

**12** – What Paul is referring to here is simply discipleship. Unfortunately, too many Christians today believe that biblical discipleship is something that everyone is to honor but nobody is expected to attain. “You know, it’s a nice thought and we should teach the principles of discipleship, but nobody in today’s modern church is really expected to reach that level of Christian walk, let alone maintain it.” But that’s not what Paul believed nor anyone else in the early church. In fact, Paul’s confession here is not only a statement of the demands of Christian discipleship; it’s also an announcement of the principles by which this calling is to be realized.

1<sup>st</sup>, Paul acknowledges he was called by Jesus Christ. It’s important to recognize that all discipleship begins with God’s call or, as Paul says, with being taken hold of by Christ Jesus. God’s call must be first, for nothing can take place spiritually in a person’s life until this happens. The call to discipleship begins with the power of God to make a spiritually dead person alive; only then are the standards of God’s calling applicable.

This is what the new birth means. Before conversion God says that a person is spiritually dead. They’re alive physically and intellectually, but not alive spiritually. So, they can’t respond to spiritual stimuli. While in this state the Word of God is a hidden book and the gospel is nonsense. Then God touches their life and His touch brings life out of death, spiritual life; then they accept Jesus and begin to understand the Bible. This is what it means to be taken hold of by God. This must happen first before there can be any true discipleship. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (**Jn 15:16**).

We see this principle evidenced throughout the Bible: Abraham was taken hold of by God and called out of Ur. Moses was taken hold of by God even when he was still a baby floating around in the Nile. David was taken hold of by God and was chosen by Him to be king while he was still out tending to his father’s sheep. In the NT, God chose John the Baptist before he was born. Jesus called His disciples while they were still fishermen. God called Paul when he was in the process of persecuting Christians. In every case the call of God was primary. This has always been the foundation stone of true discipleship.

Are you also one of God’s children? Has God laid hold of you and made you

His? Has He given you spiritual life so that you can now understand His love and grace? Or are you just mimicking Christianity? If so, then you must begin where all other disciples have begun. You must begin by acknowledging God's call to you in Christ Jesus and your need for Him, and you must commit yourself wholly to Him.

The second step Paul mentions in becoming an effective disciple of Jesus Christ is to become aware of the purpose for which he has called you. What is that purpose for which Paul and all Christians have been taken hold of? The answer is spelled out in [Rom 8:28-29](#). Most Christians know [v28](#) by heart and it clearly says God has a purpose in saving us. Many Christians are mystified by this. They can't imagine what that purpose could be even though the very next verse goes on to tell what the purpose is. What was God's purpose in saving you? So that you might be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. If you're a Christian; God saved you to make you as holy, pure, gracious, and loving as Jesus.

Now, you might be thinking that we'll all be like Jesus in heaven but this is not the way Paul means it. He's referring to the present demands of discipleship. Everything he mentions in [ch3](#) refers to the believer's present conduct. When he speaks in [v10](#) of knowing Jesus Christ, he's speaking of knowing Him now. He wants to experience Christ even in the midst of life's sufferings. When he speaks in [v11](#) of attaining to the resurrection from the dead, he's speaking of a spiritual resurrection now. In [v13-14](#) Paul speaks of a present striving for the best that God has for him now. Our text is the same. Paul's saying he wants to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ right now. This should be our desire too.

These first 2 points lead us to a very practical conclusion, because God has called Paul and because He has done so for a purpose, Paul must determine to follow after Jesus. This means God's calling always puts an obligation on His children. This isn't necessarily an obligation that's been put on the church; this is personal. Discipleship is always personal. When Jesus recommissioned Peter after his denial, there was no escaping a personal response. Jesus asked 3 times, "Simon son of Jonas, do you love Me?" Peter had to answer for himself. But then, Peter noticed John standing nearby and asked Jesus about him. Jesus' response was basically, "Don't worry about him. You follow Me." Discipleship is never conditioned on God's plans for some other Christian. His call is always personal: "Follow Me."

Discipleship is also costly. It will cost you your all. There are always some who try to be a disciple piecemeal. They try to follow Jesus an inch at a time after first assuring themselves that there's no danger and that following Him also conforms to their own plans for themselves and their future. But this is *not* discipleship at all. Discipleship means *abandoning* your sin, your past, your own conception of yourself, your plans for your own future, even at times your friends or your family, if that's God's will for you, and following Jesus.

Yes, it's difficult to just give up things that are highly treasured but it's also true that there's a far greater sense in which we really never give anything up in the service of our Lord. We give things up, but Christ gives us more. And even the things we surrender are so arranged by God that they work for our spiritual well-being. Besides, Paul is not asking us to do anything that Jesus Himself hasn't already done for our eternal benefit. Jesus Christ took on our poverty so that we might be clothed in His finery (2 Cor 8:9). He became poor as we were so that we might be clothed in His righteousness. He endured suffering and death that we might become like Him—children of God and coheirs with Him of God's glory.

True, the beggars must give up their rags but there's no comparison between our rags and God's glory. Jesus has told us that there is nothing given up in this life that is not replaced a hundredfold by spiritual treasure, not only in this world but also in eternity. Maybe there's something God's been impressing on you to lay aside so that you might be a more effective witness for Him. I don't know what it is. A hindrance for one disciple is often entirely different for another. Only you know what it is but what you might not realize is that it's the touchstone of your discipleship. Will you cast it aside to follow Jesus properly and faithfully? If you do, you will grow in your Christian discipleship, and God will bring great blessing into your life and through you also into the lives of others.

If we are to be true disciples, these principles must become our spiritual goals and Christian understanding, just as they were for Paul. But, Paul recognized that he had not yet arrived at this level of spiritual life and since he had not arrived, there was only one option open to him – he had to press on; there was no turning back for him.

**13-14** – You begin to get the idea that the Apostle Paul was not the complacent type. He wasn't the kind of Christian that sat on the sidelines and waited for things to happen. No, he pursued the purpose for which Jesus Christ had pursued him. If Paul wasn't complacent, we shouldn't be either. Paul knew he had been apprehended by Jesus for a purpose and that purpose became his life's goal! You might say Paul was ambitious but his was a sanctified ambition. Paul had been arrested to run a race and he threw himself eagerly into the race God had set before him.

But, Paul's race wasn't haphazard or without much thought or determination. In fact, Paul says he had learned to press ahead in 3 ways. 1<sup>st</sup>, he forgets those things that are behind. What things? Well, he's certainly not referring to his knowledge of Scripture or Christian doctrine. Nor is he planning to forget about God's mercy and grace, as he has been talking about them all throughout this letter. No, he's talking about the kind of forgetting that happens when we stop allowing things in the past to overshadow the present, when we let the past be past (good and bad) and we constantly look forward to the work that God still has for us to do.

When God led Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land, He provided everything they needed for their journey. They had shade by day and light by night. They had water to drink and manna to eat. The time eventually came when Israel stopped looking forward to the land that God was giving them and instead looked back to their life in Egypt (**Num 11:5-6**). Israel began to hunger for the things in their past, they began to look back and failed to trust God for both their present and their future blessings. In the same way, we often allow the things that are behind to distract us: "Remember how it was before Ida, before COVID, before...whatever?" Pining after things in the past often keeps us from looking for and discovering all that God has plan for us today and in the future.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we aren't to be thankful for past blessings. It's quite proper to thank God for His past provision, protection and presence. It's proper to remember years later how gracious God has been to us. But it would have been entirely wrong to long for these things after God had begun to lead us into new paths and had set new and greater blessings before us. It's a deception to live in the past. God wants us to press on in the present because the present is where eternity touches us now. Paul knew that a race is won only in the present moment, not in the

past or in the future. Past blessings are fine. We should be thankful for them. But now we must let those things lie in the past and move forward. There can be no forward spiritual progress without this proper forgetting.

2<sup>nd</sup>, Paul fixed his gaze on the many things God was still doing in his life. Paul was willing to go anywhere, as long as it was forward for Jesus Christ. Paul's sense of the Lord's leading was always linked to his awareness of open doors. Paul expected the Lord to open doors, and when He did, Paul went through them instantly. Through those doors Paul was constantly striving toward those things that were ahead.

But, even though Paul refers to the upward call of God, he's not sitting on his laurels waiting for a reward in heaven. Paul knew it was as wrong to live in the future as it was to live in the past. Doing either means you risk missing the more immediate blessings God has in store for us in this life. Instead of living in the past or the future, we should run our race striving toward each new task before us; whatever the day may bring. And, though we may not do as well as we should on any given day, we can lay our failures at the feet of Jesus and ask for strength to do better.

The prize is not our heavenly reward; the prize is the call of God itself, not the benefits that come from the call. The prize is being able to run the race at all; it's working with God as a partner to do the work of His kingdom. It's a high calling because it comes from above, from God. It's a high calling because it's worthy of God. It's a high calling because it's so far above the ideals of man. It's a high calling because it calls us to where Christ sits at the right hand of God. Because it is such a glorious call, it is worth reaching forward for it.

There's a 3<sup>rd</sup> aspect to Paul's statement here. The life Paul wishes to live involves not only a forgetting of the past and looking forward to the things that lie ahead. It also involves a striving for these things. This striving involves perseverance, discipline, and concentration. Do you concentrate on the Christian life, or is your mind filled with the things of this world? Do you fix your mind on the things God has for you now or do the temporary, insignificant things of this world crowd out the lasting, eternal things? If we're really to engage in that great struggle for God's best that Paul is speaking about, we must be ready for some strong spiritual conflict. Our striving isn't just against our flesh or our circumstances but against the

spiritual forces of this world that seek to hinder us. Paul calls them principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world.

Satan's attacks are directed against Jesus Christ, and he doesn't much care about a believer who's far away from his Lord. If you want an easy time as a Christian, all you have to do is to get far away from Jesus Christ—move over to the sideline of the battle. Satan's not going to bother you much out there because that is where he wants you. But, if you draw close to the Lord, as Paul admonishes us to do, if we join with him in the battle, then Satan's arrows will start coming at us too. The battle will be hard and we'll find it necessary to use God's weapons for the conflict.

As we engage in the battles of the Christian life that come from our striving for the victories that God sets before us, take confidence in the fact that the victory of Jesus Christ has already guaranteed the outcome. By His death and resurrection Jesus Christ decisively defeated Satan and the forces of darkness, and we now advance under His banner to enforce His conquest. We're to use His weapons and follow Paul's lead to press towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

A beautiful verse with a beautiful sentiment but it is so much more than just a sentiment – it's our own personal obligation to God. The God who has saved us for a purpose is still calling us to that purpose. Are you willing to respond faithfully? 😊