

## “Press On!” (Philippians 3:12-14 )

Lent 1, March 21, 2010

When it comes to big projects, what is the toughest part? Not the beginning. That can be exciting – imagining the possibilities ahead of you! And it’s not the end. That can be very satisfying – finally reaching your goal! No, the toughest part comes somewhere in the middle: the point where you realize just how big the project is, and how much more it involves than you thought, and you wonder how on earth you’re ever going to reach your goal. Yes, somewhere in the middle – that’s where it’s the toughest.

This really came home to me the last week or so while I was visiting in Germany. Most of you have heard my stories about the family bakery there. What you may not know is that my cousin Heinz, who owns the bakery, retired last July. Now it is being run by a younger man named Torsten. Thus far, everything’s running great. Torsten is very competent and energetic. He’s even started expanding the bakery to include a Café. So how’s *that* going? Well, the dreaming and planning part was exciting, but now that he’s in the middle of the project, let me tell you, it’s one big headache! Costs are higher than expected. Red tape is worse than expected. Work is taking longer than expected. You get the picture! And it’s not like he can just give up. He’s come too far for that. Plus, in his heart of hearts, he knows better than to give up – the goal is worth the effort. The question is how to reach the goal. And what’s the answer? There’s a good German expression for that. “*Augen zu und durch!*” – which basically means: *Just close your eyes and press on!*

Have you ever been in a situation like that? I suspect we all have. Maybe at home. Maybe at work. Maybe at school. Remodeling a house. Raising kids. Life is full of such situations! However exciting at the outset, however worthwhile the goal, there’s that point midway through where you realize just how much you’re up against – way more than you thought! – yet quitting is not an option. So what do you do? Honestly, what else can you do? To reach your goal, there’s only one option: “*Augen zu und durch!*” *Close your eyes and press on!*

Now, some may be thinking: *that still doesn’t guarantee you’ll reach your goal.* And you’re right. It doesn’t. In most areas of life, the best you can say is that if you just press on, there’s a pretty good chance of reaching your goal, maybe even a really, really good chance. However, there is one area of life where, if you just press on, success is guaranteed – 100% – and that is in the realm of faith, which is good to know, because not only is this the most important area of life, it can also be the toughest.

Think about it. At the beginning, when we first start to take our faith seriously, it’s exciting to have Christ in our lives; exciting to have His promises, His possibilities. And as for the end, when we finally reach our goal – well, what could be more satisfying than the joys of heaven? But here at this point of life, somewhere in the middle, it’s a whole

different ballgame, isn't it? As we follow Christ, we find unexpected costs to discipleship – some of them quite high. We struggle with unanswerable questions, unfair demands, unmanageable challenges. In short, here at this point of life, somewhere in the middle, faith can be really tough! And what do we do? For us, giving up is not an option; not for people who know Christ personally. For us, the only option is *“Augen zu und durch!”* *Close your eyes and press on!* But here's the thing to keep in mind. *If we do this, we will reach out goal.* We will! Our chances are not just pretty good. Not even really, really good. Success is 100% guaranteed by Christ Himself. He has promised: **“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** Keep pursuing the goal, and we will reach it. So when it comes to living out our faith, this approach makes sense come what may. *“Augen zu und durch!”* *Close your eyes and press on!*

No one knew this better than St. Paul. Basically, this is the approach he encouraged in our text. And as we read his words, it's worth remembering that he was not speaking theoretically. His path through life was full of twists and turns. In fact, as he wrote to the Philippians, he was cooling his heels in a Roman prison. But that didn't stop him from doing what he had to do – or recommending the same strategy to others. Someone else might have longed for the joyful good old days in the past when he first met Christ. Someone else might have dwelt on present problems, wallowing in doubt or self-pity. But not St. Paul. Experience had taught him that there is only one successful option for living out your faith – the one he practiced, the one he preached. And that is: **“forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...”** to **“press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

Now here again, some may be thinking: *Yeah, that might have worked for Paul, but he had so much going for him. He was a saint, after all!* And here again, if that's what you're thinking, you're right. Paul did have a lot going for him. He was a saint after all. But guess what? You've got just as much going for you! Because you're a saint, too – in the biblical sense of the word. Remember, *“saint”* is just another name for Christian. A *“saint”* is someone who has received salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. A *“saint”* isn't perfect – no human being can be. However, a *“saint”* is perfectly forgiven, perfectly redeemed, perfectly covered by the grace of God. And a *“saint”* – every saint – has a lot going for them because of the grace of God. As Paul was sitting in prison, writing the words of our text, he knew that Christ was with him come what may. But don't you and I have the same assurance? Christ has promised each of us, **“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”** What's more, even in that very tough situation, Paul knew the Lord would give him the resources needed to handle it. But don't you and I have the same assurance? **“My grace will be sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** Most of all, as dark as things seemed at the time, Paul knew something infinitely better was waiting for him ahead. And don't we have the same assurance? **“In my Father's House are many dwelling places. I go**

**to prepare a place for you.”** What Paul had going for him, we have going for us – the presence, the power, the promise of the Lord. What made the difference for Paul was how he used what he had going for him – and he has passed along his strategy to us. *Augen zu und durch!* **“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

If this sounds simple, it is. But simple does not mean easy, and there are a couple of things that can really get in the way. For starters, this strategy will not work if we let ourselves *focus on the past* – and that’s true, whether we’re talking about good things in the past or bad things.

I mean, focusing on the past is kind of like a guy trying to win a race running backwards. Can you picture that? Face toward the starting line, concentrating on where he had been. That wouldn’t be the best strategy, would it? Running backwards, he’d waste energy. He wouldn’t see where he was going. His chances of tripping up would be much higher. Who in their right mind would do that? And the same is true with life in general. Focusing on the past – whether it’s good or bad – wastes *our* energy, obstructs our vision, and raises our chances of tripping up. So it’s not surprising that Paul’s strategy for pressing on includes **“forgetting what lies behind.”**

Paul had lots of good things he *could* have looked back on. He made a long list of them earlier in our text. But *did* he focus on them? No. He said they were nothing **“compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus.”** He also had lots of bad things he could have looked back on, lots of mistakes, but he didn’t let himself do that, either. Instead, he said, **“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain.”** Paul knew, as we should, that longing for the good old days will not restore them. Grieving over old mistakes will not undo them. *“If only”* won’t get us anywhere. Neither will *“coulda, shoulda, woulda.”* If we’ve made mistakes in the past, let forgiveness move us beyond them. If things were better in the past, let that experience move us ahead! That’s what worked for Paul, and it can work for us, too: **“Forgetting what lies behind...press on toward the goal...”**

Another thing that will keep this strategy from working is to get *bogged down in the present*. It’s easy to let that happen. We all know how easy! But what good does it do? Focusing on present problems can paralyze us. We need a bigger perspective – a future-oriented perspective. That is why Paul’s strategy for pressing on also includes **“straining forward to what lies ahead.”**

Case in point: about midway through my second year of seminary, I got bogged down in the present. Nothing seemed to be going right. I was working two jobs to pay the bills. The classes that quarter were boring. My scheduled internship fell through the cracks. Waa, waa, waa! You get the picture! Well, one day I got so fed up that I just unloaded

on one of my friends. She listened patiently, and when I was done, she didn't say much. Just: "*Why are you doing this, then?*" At the moment, I didn't give her question much thought. You know how it is when you're letting off steam! But afterwards... That was just the right question, wasn't it? Working two jobs was not an end in itself. Enduring dull classes was not an end in itself. The stress and struggle and disappointment – none of that was an end in itself. But I had let myself get bogged down in that – let myself get bogged down in the present problems instead of keeping the goal in view. The goal! *This is just what it takes to be able, someday, to serve the Lord as a pastor.* And what a difference it made to realize this! Now, I wish I could say I learned my lesson that day and have successfully applied ever since. Unfortunately, application remains a challenge. But the lesson has stuck with me: *how important it is to look beyond present problems, remind ourselves why we are doing this, and keep the goal in view.* That was St. Paul's strategy – and what a difference it made even while cooling his heels in a Roman prison. What worked for him can work for us, too: **"Straining forward to what lies ahead...press on toward the goal..."**

This brings me back to my story about Germany and the bakery. Just before I left, I caught Torsten rushing around moving cartons of furniture. As I said goodbye, I told him how much I was looking forward to the next visit – relaxing in the new café, sitting at one of the tables he was unpacking, enjoying a nice cup of coffee and a thick slice of Apfelkuchen. That brought a smile. "That's right," he said – as if it just dawned on him that all this trouble was leading somewhere, there was a goal in sight, and reaching the goal was worth the effort! So "*Augen zu und durch!*" **"Press on toward the goal..."**

My friends, if that approach can work in a little German bakery, how much more can it work for us living out our faith! And that is the encouragement we take home with us today. Yes, life can be rough. Yes, life can be overwhelming. Yes, life can dish out way more than is fair. But even when we're in the middle of it, God is with us, His grace is sufficient for us, and whatever twists or turns our path through life may take, think what awaits us at the end! Someday, we will close our eyes one last time here on earth. Then, suddenly we'll find ourselves in a place more beautiful than we can imagine, in a life more glorious than we can conceive. We'll be free of every weakness, every pain, every sorrow. We'll bask forever in divine love. That is God's promise to us. That is God's gift to us. That is our goal. So my friends, "*Augen zu und durch!*" Or as St. Paul put it in our text: **"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead," let us "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."**