

INTRODUCTION

Spring is here. By God's mercy I am the only person in the family who is unaffected by the allergy season. Some of you may be complaining about the recent crazy weather – cold on one day and warm the other. Before long, we will be whining about the summer heat. Another month from now your kids will be done with school. That will kick off a peak time for travel. Family vacation is enjoyable. But keeping kids content takes patience and wisdom. When they are little they will keep repeating the same question from the back seats: “Are we there yet?” To keep them busy you sing songs and play games with them, give them food and take frequent stops. But what if you are not in a car but on a plane? I can completely sympathize with the parents of crying babies. I have been there. When my boys were small my wife and I had to come up with various tricks to entertain them. At one time I truly felt sorry for the man sitting in front of my younger son. His head bounced back and forth when my son hit the screen every 10 seconds. Another time we were flying on an older plane. My older son simply cried when he realized that there was no personal screen behind every seat! How were my children going to endure the next 13 hours? But of course, we survived. All the discomfort and inconvenience vanished when we reached our destination. The joy of seeing family and friends, great food, the fun of sight-seeing well worth the gruesome trip. Life is also a journey. There will be challenges and uncertainties. But one thing is sure for Christians. We know where we are heading, though your life experience and mine can be very different. The apostle Paul encouraged with us that since our journey has yet to complete we must pursue the goal that God set for us with perseverance.

EXPLANATION

1. 立定心志 Determination

Let us learn a few things from this passage. The first word we will look at is determination. Paul told us that he had made a determination to stay on the course. He stated his mindset in **verse 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. What was Paul trying to pursue? Take note that here the word “perfect” does not mean achieving perfection. It should be understood as “reaching the goal.” Paul's goal is to take hold of what Christ had set out to take hold of him. But what is that goal? It points us back to **verse 8** when Paul testified: 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. Paul life-long goal was to know Christ. This eagerness to know Christ in a personal way motivated Paul to keep going. In **verses 13-14** he used an analogy of a runner to illustrate his determination: 13 ...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. An athlete competing on a race track only has one thing in mind. It is to squeeze out every ounce of strength to beat his competitors to win the prize. It will slow him down if he looks back to check where other runners are. He will strain toward the finish line because sometimes victory will only be decided by a nose. That was Paul's mentality in the course of knowing Christ. He did not

look back to his glorious past of the knowledge and prestige he had. He now treated them like garbage. Paul's determination was to know Christ completely. Paul described in **1 Corinthians 13:12** - Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. Most Christians should know that the chapter is about love. But in a wider context Paul was discussing the gift of preaching. Those who receive the gift of preaching follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit to unveil the meaning in God's Word. However, their understanding is limited by human knowledge. Paul used an illustration of a reflection in a mirror to explain it. In the old days mirrors are not as clear as what we have now. The fuzzy image you see in a mirror is not the real person. You can know the person much better when you meet him/her face to face. Similarly, when we read the Bible, we can only perceive certain aspects about God. But one day we can know God more deeply when we see Him face to face. Relationship builds on understanding. Some people think that wedding ceremony is the final goal of their marriage. They get their prince charming or dream girl. They are happy with a lifetime meal pass or a maid who can also give birth to babies. They stop spending time to know their spouse. Yes, they know what size of clothes their spouse wear or their favorite food or hobby. But there is no more desire to get to know the person. It is not about gathering information. It is about knowing the person on a deeper level – what their dreams, passion and even fear are. I am not saying that those couples will end up in a divorce. However, they are just mindful of their own business. There are many middle-aged spiritual babies in every church who bear the same attitude in their relationship with Christ. They are saved but there is no more zeal to know Christ. They have little interest in reading the Bible or attending church meetings. Are you one of them? Do you only see Jesus as a ticket agent who gives away entrance passes to heaven? You have to come back to the Lord and ask Him to re-ignite your love for Him. The fact is, if you do not have much enthusiasm to know Christ in this life, how can you sustain the unending moments when you have to spend eternity with Him face to face?

2. 提防干擾 Distraction

Paul determined to focus on the goal to know Christ. Next, he alerted the Philippian believers about some possible distractions when they were aiming toward that goal. Paul said in **verses 18-19**: 18 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. Who were those people? Paul did not give any definite clue to identify them. But we can analyze their nature based on those two verses. Paul described that they were “enemies of the cross of Christ.” Their intent was to lead people away from God's truth. Then Paul said “their destiny is destruction,” meaning those people would not be saved eternally. Paul continued to use three pictures to illustrate what those “enemies of the cross of Christ” went after in life. Paul said “their god is their stomach.” There is a Cantonese expression that eating is like offering sacrifice to the temple of five internal organs. But if we expand the analogy, it can also apply to people who are chasing after all sorts of pleasure. Nowadays there are people who are addicted to drugs, computer games and other substances. Those stuff become their gods and completely control their lives. Then Paul said “their glory is in their shame.” Just a few decades ago no one would dare to bring up issues like homosexuality or extra-marital affair. But now, on the guise of personal freedom you cannot criticize people's immoral behavior, and laws have to be established to protect their right to

practice depraved lifestyle. Finally, Paul summarized that those people's "mind is on earthly things." They are only living for the here and now. We Chinese say some people enjoy getting drunk with today's wine. What kind of people were Paul describing here? Some Bible scholars believed those people were the Jewish Christians Paul mentioned in the first half of chapter 3. They insisted that the brothers and sisters of Gentile origins had to strictly obey the Old Testament Law. However, Paul's descriptions of their indulgence in pleasure and their eternal destruction do not quite fit the picture. Another possibility is that they were some self-proclaimed Christians who were actually unsaved. Those people have some head knowledge about the Bible, but they only preach a partial truth. They care about themselves instead of God's Kingdom. They enjoyed an unrestricted and sinful lifestyle. The apostle Peter had something to say about them. **2 Peter 2:21-22** read: 21 It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. 22 Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud." An example in today's world would be those big names church leaders who preach a "health and wealth gospel." They live a lavish lifestyle. Some people, even Christians are misled. They buy into those lies and believe that prosperity is the only proof of God's blessing. Thus, they think that poverty, sickness and inter-personal conflict should not come to them if God truly loves His children. Such heresy can easily become distraction when we pursue our goal to know Christ. We wonder why we have to live a pitiful life when there is an easier way. Why can't we grab the goodies of both worlds like them – the treasure of this life and the glory of eternity? There are people everywhere whose life purpose is just like that. Just turn on the TV, check the internet or read the covers of secular magazines at any grocery store. Their plans are to make the most money they can, retire as soon as possible, then enjoy life with the best toys they collect. Their mind is on earthly things. We should be aware of those distractions as we follow Christ. We should always remember that it is God who called us. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying you should not work hard in your profession. Quite the contrary. Do the best you can in your area of specialty with the gifts and talents God has given you. It does not matter whether you are an accountant or a janitor. You work hard for the glory of God. With that mentality, you can be joyful if you make a lot or not much compared to others, or if people notice of your contribution or they do not. Your ultimate boss is not in the office but up there!

3. 遙望終點 Destination

Paul encouraged us not to occupy our mind with earthly things. Instead, we should focus on our eternal destination. He said in **verses 20-21**: 20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. At that time, people were obligated to obey the Roman government. However, Paul told the Philippian believers that they actually had a dual-citizenship. They also belonged to the Kingdom of God. That was exactly why Christians suffered persecution. It was because God's ruling was often at odd with earthly ruling. At that time, people had to address Caesar the Emperor as lord. But for Christians their only Lord was Jesus. Make no mistake. The Bible also calls us to submit to the authority of this world, since all the rulers derive their power from God. Since our true citizenship is in heaven we only live a transitional life on the earth. We should eagerly wait for the second coming of Christ. When Jesus comes we will be given a new and

eternal body. We will go home with the Lord and spend eternity with Him. Paul said in **1 Corinthians 15:54** this way: When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." When Jesus returns He will completely eradicate the problem of sin. Even death will be no more. That promise gives Christians hope to deal with the problems of this life. There will still be suffering. But as we rely on God we can have strength to face various hardship. Paul also said in **Romans 8:20-21** that: 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Very often suffering reminds us that we do not belong to this world. After all, who will think of heaven when everything is going smoothly? We would like to stay longer when our bodies are healthy, just graduated from school or just received a job promotion, or just have a new-born baby. On the contrary, when you have not finished a big work or school project that is due tomorrow, diagnosed with a major illness or have a big fight with your spouse you may want Jesus to come back tonight. You say to yourself: "I don't want to live anymore!" The bright hope of eternity should not make us pessimists. Rather, the certainty of heaven will make us more positive to face the problems in this life. We honestly admit that one day our memory will fade away, our hair will turn gray and arthritis may develop. But those issues do not mean the end of the world. We know that the destination is ahead of us. A tourist was passing through a historical monastery. He learned that a well-known monk had lived there for the past few decades. He wanted to see this holy man, hoping to hear some words of wisdom from him. He was surprised to find that this wise man lived in a small room with nothing but a table and a few chairs. "Master, where is your other furniture?" the man inquired. "Sir, where is your furniture?" the monk replied. The tourist found the question interesting. He said: "Master, I don't live here. I left my belongings home because I am only traveling." The holy man responded with a smile: "So am I." Brothers and sisters: we are only passing through. We should look forward to our destination. We can ease our burden if we truly realize that our citizenship is in heaven. We can see this life with an eternal perspective. We can make sense of our present from an everlasting point of view. We need to ask ourselves: do we long for our heavenly home? Or are we trying to create our version of heaven on earth? Do we still want to linger on when the time comes for the Lord to call us home?

CONCLUSION

Our journey has yet to complete. We must pursue the goal that God set for us with perseverance. What does all this mean to you? You may feel that you will go back to your reality when you walk out of this place. What keeps you going in your daily mundane? Paul's purpose for life comes down to a few words: know Christ. That makes everything in our life meaningful. It is the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. A marathon runner from Tanzania was dead last. He crossed the finish line an hour after all the other athletes had completed the event. Only a handful of spectators remained in the stadium. His leg was bleeding and he just hobbled to complete the last lap. One journalist asked the runner why he stayed on the course with pain. "My country did not send me here to start the race." He said. "They sent me here to finish." Brothers and sisters: the road is long. God is watching us and helping us to finish the race.