

Putting the Pieces Together

Philippians 3:12-14 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Sunday, 29 August 2010 00:00

Philippians 3:12-14 *Putting the Pieces Together* **Borderland** The nations of Uganda and Kenya do not get along well. Nations which share a border on the Eastern side of the African continent, it is no simple thing to cross from one to the other.

You cannot take a car from one country to the other. You have to walk the dusty earth between them. First, you go through Ugandan customs—a wood hut that splices together two lengths of steel mesh fence crowned with coils of barbed wire. The man in the hut wants to know why you were in his country, why you're leaving it, and what you're taking with you. He frisks you and checks your bags. A well placed bribe will help you speed things up. Then papers are stamped and you are allowed to cross the fence.

But you're not in Kenya yet. This is a double crossing. Kenya has its own fence, its own customs building, its own officials who ask questions and stamp papers and take bribes.

And in between—a patch of earth maybe 100 yards wide and 300 yards long—is borderland. It's no-man's land. Claimed and defended by neither country. All laws are suspended in borderland, no authority exists. Shoot a man, rob him, beat him: the guards on either side would do nothing.

Interestingly, if you cross this borderland you will find it thronged with people. Peddlers, hawkers, beggars. A carnival of the wayward and the waylaid. These are people who find comfort being stuck in-between. They are neither Ugandan nor Kenyan, but have established a sort of suspended existence between the two worlds.

Author Mark Buchanan uses this "borderland" as a metaphor for the Christian life. In his book *Your God is Too Safe* he suggests that many Christians are stuck "in-between." They've accepted Christ as Savior—they've put their trust in His death and resurrection; they have, if you will, crossed through the first customs booth—but they have not fully given Jesus control of their life as Lord—they have not pursued the path of sanctification into the new land. Instead, many Christians exist in a borderland where they claim the name of Jesus but go no deeper in their life with Him. (pages 19-21)

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60 years ago, A.W. Tozer observed the same thing in his book

The Pursuit of God.¹

He wrote:

Everything is made to center upon the initial act of 'accepting' Christ . . . and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found Him, we need no more seek Him. (p. 16)

Now understand—salvation is by grace. It is only because of what Jesus has done on the cross that we have any hope of a relationship with God. And there is nothing we can do or add to the work that Jesus has done.

But that doesn't mean that the Christian life is about sitting back and just receiving what Jesus has to give us. It doesn't mean we should be content to dwell on borderland—claimed out of the old world but not fully invested in the new. Instead, the realization of what Jesus has done for us should spur us on to deepen our relationship with Him.

That's the way the Apostle Paul sees it.

Taking Hold

Last week we looked at the beginning of Philippians 3 where we saw that everything pales in comparison to knowing Christ. Paul called everything else garbage. He said his greatest desire was "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection."

And, of course, we could say that if anybody knew Jesus, it was Paul. When he wrote Philippians he had walked with Jesus for some 30 years. He had written a good portion of the New Testament, explaining the mysteries of grace and salvation. He had given every aspect of his life over to knowing and serving Jesus.

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And yet, Paul was not content with what he knew of Jesus. He wanted still more.

Our passage today is Philippians 3:12-14:

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.

The key phrase here is “press on.” Paul uses it twice, in verse 12 and again in verse 14. And He’s not talking about fingernails. Paul’s desire is to keep moving forward. To keep growing in his relationship with Jesus. To take the next step.

And notice, this isn’t some sort of legalistic performance, where Paul thinks he needs to earn his standing with God. Paul isn’t denying grace. He’s responding to it.

Verse 12 says that he presses on to “take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” Paul seeks to gain Christ because Christ has already gained him. “The irresistible grace of Christ overcoming Paul’s rebellion and saving him from sin did not make Paul passive; it made him powerful!” (John Piper, “Going Hard after the Holy God”)

Verse 14 says much the same thing: “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Having been called heavenward, Paul pursues heaven. Having been saved, Paul is not content to stay on the borderlands of faith but wants to press forward into its very depths.

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As Tozer said: "To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love" (p. 15). And as the great Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote: "Wherever there is true grace there is a desire for more grace."

And so, I think we need to move out of the borderlands. We need to keep stepping forward in our relationship with Jesus. As we look at the year ahead my vision for us as a church is that we will all press on in our relationship with Jesus. I'll put it like this:

Hope Church needs to go hard after God.

Because Jesus has taken hold of us, we must press on to take hold of Him. Because Jesus has called us heavenward, we must go hard after the prize that awaits us. In the year ahead, my goal for myself, my goal for my family, and my goal for the church is that we will go hard after God.

Three Steps in Going Hard After God

So how do we do that?

How do we go hard after God

?

I have four things to suggest. Three principles for helping us get the right mindset which I'll draw out of verse 13; and then one, very specific challenge that can help us all go hard after God in the next year.

So, first, three steps in going hard after God from **verse 13**

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1. First, Develop a Holy Appetite.

Paul says: "Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it." Paul says that he has not yet arrived. He's still hungry for more of Jesus.

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Paul is not setting himself up as some sort of Spiritual Master, here. He's inviting us to imitate him—but not because he thinks he has it all figured out, but because he sees himself as an example in his continual striving for more of Jesus. He wants us to strive like he strives.

In other words, Paul is not satisfied. He knows he has room to grow. And he knows we all have room to grow as well.

In the same way, our first step in going hard after God is to develop a holy hunger for more of God. We need to stand in front of the mirror of God's Word and recognize that we have not yet arrived. We have to let the parts of Christ that we have tasted whet our appetites for more of Him.

Here's an illustration: I like crab legs, steamed and dipped in butter. But the thing about crab legs is: there's really not that much meat on them. You have to eat quite a bit to feel full. And once I get that first taste of crab, I want more. So I don't like to order crab legs at a restaurant, since you only get a few. The only way I like to eat crab is when it is on a buffet, so I can go back again and again and again. The more I eat, the more I'm hungry for more.

We need to develop that kind of Holy appetite for Jesus.

St. Bernard wrote this verse:

We taste Thee, O Thou Living Bread,

And long to feast upon Thee still:

We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead

And thirst our souls from Thee to fill.

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I had a seminary professor who liked to say there is always more of Christ to be discovered. His point was that no matter how much we learned and experienced of Jesus, there would be still more to learn and discover. His goal was that we would all be continuously hungry for Him.

2. Second, Forget what is behind

Paul writes, "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind." I take this to mean that anything in your background which hinders your pursuit of God you should put out of your mind.

I read a story this week about 2 old men sitting on a park bench when one of the men said, "You know as I get older I can't remember things the way I used to." The other man said, "I used to have that problem too until I took this memory course. It's a very simple technique, based on associating words with names, places and events. Now because of that I don't have trouble remembering anything at all." The first man said, "Really? What was the name of the course?"

The old man got a puzzled look on his face, turned white as a sheet, scratched his head, then asked, "What's the flower with a long stem, has thorns on it, the petals can be white or yellow or red?" "A rose?" the other man replied. "Yes, thank you!"

He turned to his wife and said, "Rose, what was the name of that memory course?" When Paul says we should forget I don't think he means all Christians need a sort of collective amnesia. He's not saying we need to be ignorant of the past. This doesn't mean that we can't celebrate God's faithfulness in the past. There's nothing wrong with telling God Stories, and memories of God's blessings in the past can be powerful spiritual artillery for future steps of faith.

It's just that, we can't live in the past. Christians should never be satisfied with yesterday's grace. We should never substitute nostalgia for hope.

Memories of successes can make you smug and self-satisfied. Always thinking about how things used to be, or how close to God we once were, may lead us to stop going hard after God now.

Likewise, memories of past failures can make us feel hopeless and paralyzed with guilt.

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We should never look back like that. Rather, we must give humble thanks for successes; make humble confessions for failure; then turn to the future and go hard after God.

3. □ Third, strain toward what is ahead.

Verse 13 ends: “Straining toward what is ahead.” The third step in going hard after God is to keep our focus on what is coming.

The image here is an athletic one. Like a runner straining for the finish line.

In the last couple of years I’ve gotten pretty serious about running. I’m not a competitive runner, by any means, but I have used running to get in shape (and so I can eat crab legs). Several of us have set a goal of running the Des Moines half-marathon in October. We find having a goal motivates us to get up out of bed and keep running. When it is 6 in the morning, and the bed feels nice and comfortable, and we know our muscles are going to ache, it’s tempting to stay in bed and shut off the alarm. But then I think about what lies ahead—13 miles—and how hard that’s going to be to do if I don’t get my miles in—and I get up and I run. (Unless it’s raining, we have a very strict “no running in the rain policy.”)

And even when I am running, I find it helps to keep my eyes on the finish. After we run several miles, it’s always good to know that the end is near. In fact, I usually run faster when I can see the end—not because I’m trying to improve my time—but because I know the faster I run the sooner I can quit.

Well, in the same way, the way to go hard after God is with the same kind of discipline and straining of a runner. We need to keep our eyes on the finish line—keep our focus on our final reward with Jesus in heaven—and then strain with everything we have to prepare ourselves for him.

I doubt that there has ever been a Christian who reached heights of knowledge and joy and obedience without a plan and discipline and self-denial. God does not promise his riches to aimless people. Paul did not run aimlessly or beat the air. He lived with spiritual goals in view and controlled his passions for the sake of those goals.

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Specific Next Step

So, those are three principles to help us go hard after God. Develop a holy appetite. Forget what lies behind. Strain towards what is ahead. That's the mindset we all need as we go into this next year. It's going to help us all grow in our relationship with Jesus.

But I realize those are somewhat vague ideas. It's all very good to say that we are going to be hungry for God and focus on what lies ahead, but that doesn't necessarily change our behavior. It doesn't guarantee that we'll really grow.

So I want to give you a fourth, very specific step. In this year when we go hard after God I think we all need to commit to

reading our Bibles

. That's the challenge. Reading our Bibles.

A couple of years ago several of us were at a conference where Bill Hybels spoke. Hybels is the lead pastor of Willow Creek Church outside of Chicago—one of the most influential churches in America. And it was at that conference that we learned about the Reveal survey, because it was first used at Willow Creek.

And as Hybels talked about the four stages of a relationship with Jesus, he said the one thing that was guaranteed to help people in all four stages take the next step was upping their engagement with the Bible. He said no matter where you are—if you are exploring a relationship with Jesus or growing in a relationship with Jesus or becoming close to Jesus or even leading a Christ-centered life—if you get involved in an intentional and regular program of Bible reading you will also grow in your relationship with Jesus.

So—if we want to go hard after Jesus as a church, a very specific way we can do that is by doing a church-wide Bible reading program.

And that's what we're going to do. My challenge for all of us is to commit to reading our Bibles in the next year.

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Shrink the Challenge

Now, I know that some of you have read through your Bibles several times. Some of you are probably doing a Bible reading program right now. And I'm guessing that a lot of us have set a goal of reading through the Bible only to sputter and fail right around the book of Leviticus.

While we all agree that reading the Bible is good for us, it's not always so easy to do.

That's why the Bible reading program we've chosen is the Essential 100. Instead of attempting to read every chapter of the Bible, what the E100 does is choose 100 key Bible passages (a chapter or two long) that will help us follow the storyline of the Bible. It's a 20 week program—10 weeks for the Old Testament, 10 for the New—and when we are done you won't have read the entire Bible, but you will have gotten the main ideas. And hopefully, we'll be able to develop habits that will allow us to make regular Bible reading a permanent feature in our lives.

All you need to do the E100 program is a Bible. It doesn't matter what translation. We'll put the 5 readings for the week in the bulletin every Sunday, and then you read them at a time you choose. Every Sunday, I'll preach a sermon that sort of covers the section of the Bible we were all reading in for the past week.

Plus, if you want, there's a devotional book—called the Essential Bible Guide—that you can pick up for \$10. It has daily readings that tie in to the passage assigned for that day. It's the kind of book you can use individually—or, if you want to do the challenge as a family at supper time or before bed—the devotional is a real easy read.

There are also small group questions that go with each set of 5 weekly readings. Part of the challenge here is for everybody to get into a small group—do the Bible reading, come to church, and then get together with your small group and discuss what you read. If you are not in a small group yet, there will be a table set up as we go to lunch with people who can take your name and help you find a group.

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So this is how we are going to go hard after God in 2010-2011. We're going to develop a holy appetite for more of God. We're going to forget about the things that might lock us into the past. We're going to strain towards what lies ahead. And we're going to read our Bibles.

I want to invite you to take the E100 Challenge. And to do that we're going to create a signature wall. Around the room right now are several puzzle pieces, and as the band plays I'm going to invite you to come up and sign a piece as a part of your commitment to read your Bibles in the year ahead.

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