

Deuteronomy 31: 7-8

January 16, 2022

Philippians 3:12-14

## Starting the New Year With Determination

Last week I spoke about entering the New Year with “iron shoes” fit for a rough road – we’ll all have some rough roads to travel before the year is out. I also spoke of how **God’s strength is available to us for each day we face ... every day we face ... every kind of day we face.**

The dawn of each new year is usually a time of hope and ambition, of dreams for the future, and thoughts of a better life. I sure hope that is the case for you. But for some, the New Year may have shadows already. Unemployment is still high and the economy drags. The virus pandemic still lingers and fear still lurks. We could mention troubles in our country and abroad. But most people focus on the troubles in their health, their home, or their workplace.

One of the sad lessons of history is that tough times often reward the desperate and dangerous ...like demagogues, anarchists, rabid nationalists, and totalitarians who grasp for political power. This year might be the most important twelve months in the last 80 years. Virus fears, global uncertainty, domestic troubles, our own personal apprehensions and concerns, add up to a very anxious mix. Someone once wrote: “In America, worry has become part of our national culture. You could write on countless American gravestones the epitaph: ‘Hurried, Worried, Buried.’”

### Worry

The Bible says, **Do not be anxious about anything, Philippians 4:6.** Oh great, just quote the Bible and your troubles go away.... Not really. Most of us worry about one thing or another or about many things. **Worry is like a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind.** A confession here: I come from a long line of practiced and dedicated worriers. It has been a lifetime work for me to overcome the ill effects of worry. I’ve had to learn that worry is interest paid on borrowed trouble, and steals joy from the present.

Here’s what the Lord Jesus said, **What one of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Matthew 6:27.** Think about it. Can you add an hour to your life by worrying? No. Actually, worry may shorten your life by causing unhealthy stress. Jesus had some practical words to say here: **Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself, Matthew 6:34.** Why borrow trouble from tomorrow? Here’s a few ways that worry is counterproductive:

- **Worry focuses on the problem, not the solution.**

- **Worry causes us to assume responsibility that belongs only to God.** One of our church members

in Palo Alto used to say, “If you’re going to worry, why pray? And if you’re going to pray, why worry?”

- Worry saps our joy and drains our energy.

- Worry keeps us sidetracked when we could be doing God’s will. We have a little plaque hanging in our kitchen which pictures a rocking chair with these words: “Worry is like a rocking chair, it keeps you busy but never gets you anywhere.”

If we want to get off to a good start this year, we need to put faith in Christ ahead of worry. Our reading from Philipians provides direction, beginning with a very frank admission.

### **Humble Evaluation**

If anyone had reason to brag about his accomplishments, it would be the Apostle Paul. Yet he says, *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, Phil. 3:12a*. Can any of you relate to that? Despite having met the Lord on the Damascus Road, despite having preached across the eastern Mediterranean region, despite being an apostle called by God, despite writing letters inspired by the Holy Spirit, despite all that he had endured, he does not brag about any of it. He knows that he is a sinner saved by grace; he even calls himself the “chief of sinners” 1 Timothy 1:15. Despite his zealotry, he’s scored no points with God and he makes no claim of being perfect or having arrived in his spiritual journey. On the other hand, because of his new life in Christ Paul could see more clearly his own sins. That is one of the hardest things for all of us to do.

In reality, life simply is not perfect and neither are people. So, whenever we face a difficulty in life, we ought to begin by saying, “It is what it is.” That’s not easy to do. We would rather play games, make excuses, cover up, pretend, ignore the obvious, and live in fantasyland. But you can’t get better until you come to grips with reality. It’s hard to admit your marriage is in trouble. It’s hard to admit your career is on the rocks. It’s hard to admit your dreams are smashed. It’s hard to admit your children are struggling. It’s hard to admit you’re broke. It’s hard to admit you have a problem with alcohol. It’s hard to admit you’ve got a critical spirit. It’s hard to admit you’re filled with anger.

But there is no getting better until you admit what it is. It’s like your health: you can’t better until you accept the diagnosis and begin the treatment. So it is with all the trials of life. Admit what it is, then by God’s grace you can move on from there.

Paul plainly says, “I have not yet obtained.” One translation says, “I do not claim that I have already succeeded.” J. B. Phillips translates it like this: “I do not consider myself to have ‘arrived’, spiritually.” There’s always a danger of becoming a “professional Christian,” thinking you don’t have any more real

growing to do. **It's easy to become insensitive to sin because you think you are above it or can't see it in yourself.** Martin Luther remarked that pride is so deep within us that we must "repent of our repentance," by which he meant that even our repenting is tinged with pride, e. g. "Look at me! I'm honest enough to repent of my sins. I don't cover things up." Sin is so much with us that even our confession contains within it the seeds of our next transgression.

Were it not for His grace, none of us could ever stand before the Lord. Here's a good thought to start the year . . . "I'm not as strong or as wise as I think I am, but God is stronger and wiser than I can imagine." In our better moments we know the truth about ourselves: We're not as ... as we think we are.

The one thing that keeps us going is this: **Jesus is a wonderful Savior, and He is everything we are not.** He is strong, wise, and good. He is holy and righteous. He is loving and merciful. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is all these things all the time far more than we can imagine.

### **Holy Aspiration**

Paul utters a statement that sums up the Christian life: ***But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me, Phil. 3:12b.*** Christ found me. Christ saved me. He has a purpose for my life. **The supreme purpose of my life is to discover His purpose for me!** That may take a lifetime, involving determination and focus, which leads to more growth in grace and develops the character of Christ in me.

***But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, Phil. 3:13.*** Focus, focus, focus - "one thing I do." To excel in any area of life, a person cannot say, "These 20 things I do." A single-minded focus in any endeavor generally wins a great reward. If you must do many things (and if you are a parent and working, or if you're handling your household expenses and health insurance and all that goes with living these days) then you must focus on one at a time to complete them well. Too many of us are fragmented people. It would be good for each of us to look in the mirror and ask, "Do you know what you are doing? Do you know why you are doing it?"

Growing in God's grace means joining the Apostle Paul to **focus on the one thing needful: looking to the heavenly goal of winning the prize which is life in Christ.** That's what will make us able to stand before Jesus Christ and hear Him say, ***Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord, Matt. 25:21.***

In a biography of Civil War Confederate General Robert E. Lee (Charles Bracelen Flood, *Lee: The Last Years*), it is told of a time after the war when Gen. Lee visited a woman who showed him the remains of a grand old tree in front of her home. There she cried bitterly that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Union artillery fire. She waited for Lee to condemn the North or at least

sympathize with her loss. Lee paused and then said, "Cut it down, my dear madam, and forget it."

***Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, Phil. 3:13.*** Surely this is a good word for a new year. **Forgetting some things can be healthy:** our worries, our fears, our failures, our defeats, the attacks of our enemies. Let us lay aside even the accomplishments of the past year, the good things we think we have done. As many football coaches like to say, "Last year means nothing." How right they are. If we lost, it means nothing. If we won the Super Bowl, it means nothing. Whatever happened in 2021: let it go. When I'm asked what is my best sermon my response is, "The next one." As long as we're looking back, it's hard to move forward.

### **Press On To What Is Ahead**

When famed missionary Dr. David Livingstone returned from Africa to England, he was asked, "Where are you ready to go next?" "I am ready to go anywhere," he replied, "provided it be forward." This must be the attitude of the child of God every single day. "Lord, I am ready to go wherever you lead today." So many of us make our list and say, "Lord, if you don't mind, I'm busy today so could you just initial this at the bottom, and I won't bother you anymore." But that's not how it works. When people ask about the "secret" of God's will, the answer is this: it begins in the morning when you say, "Lord, let me take the next step with you today."

If Paul were here today, he would say, "Press on!" I've watched more football games this season than previously. You ever see those close plays where the ball carrier is swarmed by opposing players and yet he manages to stretch the ball across the goal line? At first it's hard to tell in the pile of players. But the replay shows that by a matter of inches, he had pushed the ball across the goal line. A cheer goes up. That's the sort of effort that wins in football and in the Christian life.

***I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus, Phil. 3:14.*** In the spiritual life, direction makes all the difference. True believers aren't in heaven yet, but they aim their steps in that direction. **William Borden**, heir to the Bordon Dairy Estate, graduated from a Chicago high school in 1904. His parents gave him a trip to Europe and Asia as a gift. He had a million dollars at his disposal. But he saw the needs of peoples there, and he made a commitment. He wrote home and said: I'm going to give my life to mission work in China! **In the back of his Bible, he wrote two words: No Reserves!**

He went on to Yale University. Lot's of high paying job offers came his way. But he kept true to his commitments. His friends thought he was foolish to give up so much for so little. But he wrote in the back of his Bible **two more words: No Retreats!**

He studied theology and missions at Princeton Seminary, and then headed for China. On the way, there was an orientation stop in Egypt. While young Borden was there, he was stricken with cerebral meningitis. He was dying; and he knew it. A waste? A foolish way for him to go? Not according to his own thoughts. In his Bible he wrote two more words, right under No Reserves! and No Retreats! **His last two words: No Regrets!** Why no regrets? Because he set his life in the right direction. What direction are you headed?

It's essential to start well – this year or any year. But we **to end well we must also keep doing well.** Paul said, "I haven't arrived yet, but I'm still climbing!" That's still a word for us. No one can say with certainty what the New Year will bring or if we will even be here in twelve months. But that thought does not alarm me, nor should it you. To all our worries the Lord says quite simply: **Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid, Matt. 14:27.**

We, of all people, can be optimistic in the New Year. We have a great future because we have a great God who owns the future. We'll have our share of hard times in the New Year, but over it all is the promise that God himself goes ahead of you. Lift up your head. Be of good cheer for ...

***The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you, Deut. 31:8.***