

A Shared Pursuit

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Date: 15 February 2026

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[0 : 00] Let me begin by leading us in prayer. Let's pray. Well, Father, as we sung this morning, we stand as children of the promise. We want to fix our eyes on our soul's reward by your spirit. We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen. Premature celebrations can have massive consequences. That's something Lindsay Yacobellis discovered the hard way. Back in the 2006 Winter Olympics, she competed in something called the Women's Snowboard Cross. Now, the format of this event is simple. Navigate the course to get to the finish line as fast as possible.

There are no points for style, only for finishing first. And in the final race, Yacobellis was so far ahead of the field, victory was essentially guaranteed.

[1 : 16] But as she approached the final stretch, she decided to celebrate early. Instead of riding it out safely, she performed a showboating trick, something she clearly didn't need to do.

And you can probably guess what happened next already, can't you? Unfortunately for her, she landed awkwardly, fell, and watched as another competitor passed her by. Her problem wasn't a lack of ability, it was complacency. She acted as if the race was already over. And she paid the price for it.

Premature celebrations can have massive consequences. And if you watch the footage of that race, you can see the reaction of Yacobellis' coach.

He has his head buried in his hands, crying out in dismay as he watches his athlete throw away gold. And basically, Paul doesn't want to be that coach.

[2 : 27] You see, how do you think we're doing here at KEC? Maybe some of you are optimistic. After all, we support mission partners.

We've got a university fellowship up and running. We're even slowly raising younger leaders. We're not doing too badly, you say. Certainly, at least some in the Philippian church would have felt that way about their church.

After all, haven't they been partnering faithfully with Paul? Haven't they stood firm against opposition? Haven't they raised people like Apophroditus, who sacrificed to support Paul's ministry? In fact, if you called them a model church, I would happily agree with you. But Paul knows the race isn't over yet.

And so in today's passage, Paul urges us not to take our foot off the pedal, not because we are failing, but because he knows even good teams sometimes lose by relaxing too early.

[3 : 40] And to make sure we finish well, Paul has three directives for us. Firstly, in verses 12 to 14, he says, don't slack off.

Press on towards the goal. Then secondly, in verses 15 to 19, he tells us, don't run alone. Run with the mature. And thirdly, in verses 20 to 21, he reminds us, don't forget the finish.

Get excited about heaven. So keep running, follow the right people, fix your eyes on the prize, and remember where the finish line is so that you'll cross it.

That's more or less where we're going today. So let's look firstly at our first directive. Don't slack off, press on.

Now take a look at our coach, Paul. Remember last week? What was his CV like? Well, this guy had some serious qualifications.

[4 : 48] Hebrew of Hebrews, faultless in his law keeping, zealous to the last degree. You know, is there anything else for this guy left to achieve? Ah, but someone might say, that's pre-Christian Paul, so it doesn't count.

But Christian Paul is very impressive too, isn't he? This is the tireless evangelist.

This is the church planter extraordinaire. And in case we've forgotten, you know the best-selling book of all time called the Bible?

Hmm, who authored half of the New Testament? Oh, that's right. Our coach, Paul. I mean, clearly Paul isn't just some apprentice starting out on all this Christianity stuff.

He is more like the ultimate Christian Jedi master. And yet, how does Paul regard himself? Verse 12, not that I have already obtained all this.

[6 : 04] Not that I have already arrived at my goal. Or verse 13, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of all this.

So, clearly, Paul doesn't regard himself as the finished product. He hasn't arrived. He's still an apprentice, not a Jedi master.

And that is why he pushes on to strain his muscles, to taste his sweat, to gasp for air. He knows there is still plenty more room for progress.

You see, Paul isn't practicing some false modesty here. No, he's very much in touch with reality. For he knows he hasn't obtained his resurrection body yet.

That's what the this of verse 12 must, at the very least, include. Because that is what he's just been talking about in verse 11.

[7 : 14] 10. But he probably means more than that, because when he says he hasn't arrived at his goal, he's basically saying he has yet to reach full maturity.

He isn't fully developed. That's why the ESV translates this verse as saying he isn't perfect yet. In other words, he knows he still has a long way to go to know Christ.

Do I really know what it means to participate in his sufferings? He's asking. Do I really know what it means to have his resurrection power working in me, shaping me to become more and more like Jesus?

and his conclusion is, no, I don't consider myself to really, truly know yet.

So I press on. I wonder what you make of that. You see, some of us have been Christians for a really long time.

[8 : 29] And we know our Bibles pretty well, don't we? We've been on the serving roster for years. We've been giving consistently. We've sat through hundreds of sermons.

So maybe, perhaps even without realizing it, we're tempted to think, I've arrived. I'm spiritually mature. Haven't I locked the hours?

But here is the danger. We might have confused familiarity with the map, for actually exploring the land.

Think about it this way. After years in church, it is entirely possible to become experts on the map. We know where all the landmarks are.

John 3, 16, Philippians 4, verse 13, Jeremiah 29, verse 11. We can trace the theological route. We might even be able to teach it to others.

[9 : 37] And here's our temptation. We fold up the map and say, oh, I know this place like the back of my hand. I've studied it thoroughly.

There's nothing new to discover. But knowing the map isn't the same as walking the terrain, is it? It's not that the map is wrong, it's essential, in fact. It shows us the territory. But there is a world of difference between being familiar with the map and actually being on the ground, breathing the air, seeing the scenery, taking in the atmosphere.

And here is the question Paul forces us to ask. have I confused the two? Do I think I have arrived simply because I'm familiar with the map?

Well, Paul says, I still haven't explored the whole territory, and I drew some of the map. That's why I refuse to stay where I am.

[10 : 48] I don't slide off. I keep exploring. Even when I am in prison, I don't just rest on my laurels, but I see this as the latest opportunity to put into practice my life mantra to live is Christ.

That's what verse 12 is saying to us. You see, what is true Christian maturity? It's not actually to do with how old you are.

It doesn't even have all that much to do with how long you've been a Christian or how much you have done for Jesus. No, one key sign of Christian maturity is how hungry we stay for Jesus.

And one sign of a mature church is when we recognize no matter how far we've come, we still have further to go.

people. And that is why a mature Christian wouldn't find the prayer of Philippians 1 verse 9 to 11 strange. That we might abound more and more in the knowledge and depth of insight so that we might discern what is best.

[12 : 05] That we can be presented pure and blameless. By contrast, an immature Christian isn't someone who stops believing.

Rather, it is someone who stops aspiring. It's someone who stops longing and settles for a faith that keeps them busy without drawing them deeper into knowing Christ.

And there is a real danger to thinking we have arrived, even literally. back in 2014, Southwest Airlines Flight 4013 thought they had arrived at Branson Airport.

That's where they were supposed to go. But as they approached their destination, the pilots relaxed and mistakenly identified another airport roughly nine miles before their destination as the place to land.

And they got lucky. The runway at the airport was much shorter, so they had to apply maximum braking and stop just in time.

[13 : 23] Any further, and the plane would have run out of runway with potentially tragic consequences. And spiritually, it's the same.

We can think we have arrived when we haven't end up in big trouble. But how do we press on? Verse 13 tells us we need first of all to forget what is behind. In 1954, an event known as the Miracle Mile took place.

On one side you had the Englishman Roger Bannister. On the other side, the Australian John Landy. At that point, they were the only people in the world to have run the mile in under four minutes.

And they were going to race one another. Landy led most of the way, but Bannister began catching up. And on the last bend, Landy decided to look over his left shoulder to see where Bannister was.

[14 : 40] And as he looked one way, Bannister burst past him the other way and overtook him. Landy and Bannister both agreed later that was the turning point of the race.

He looked back the wrong way and it cost him. And Paul says, spiritually speaking, we too can look back the wrong way.

You see, when we look back at the past, it can either inflate or deflate us. Perhaps we think back to that time when we were involved in the Christian fellowship at university and we held a leadership position and things went well.

People were growing spiritually, including ourselves. Or if you want a specific KEC example, perhaps we think back to that time when our congregation was even bigger than today and we were actively planting daughter churches around Kuching.

And we can look back at past achievements in our Christian life and feel satisfied with that. We think, ah, that's enough.

[15 : 56] And then perhaps we say, well, I don't have the same energy or the same emotions anymore, so I won't do anything anymore. So we let the past stop us today.

Now, it is important to clarify, Paul isn't asking us to stop celebrating important milestones in our Christian or church life. But he is saying, if we look back in such a way that it means we slack off, then we are looking back the wrong way.

Because the only kind of looking back that is good is the kind that pushes us to keep moving forward today. But if we look back only to boast in those achievements or to evoke a certain kind of nostalgia, Paul says, stop it!

Forget it all! Because it only inflates us. But the other reason why looking back can be dangerous is because sometimes the past can also deflate us.

After all, we all can look back and see all the times we have stumbled, haven't we? Maybe even just this past week, you can think of a specific sin, a specific failure, a specific indifference to Jesus, and it just sucks all the life out of you.

[17 : 29] You say to yourself, how can I even be worthy to be in this race? I should just disqualify myself and get out now. I know that feeling.

And if you think about it, that is how Paul could have felt too. Right? I mean, this is the guy who persecuted the church.

Surely there's more than enough guilt for him to carry around. In the book of Acts, it is likely that he signed off on Stephen's execution.

So if he were to look back at his past, he would have seen that word murderer in bright red. How can you move forward then?

Paul says because of Jesus, you can leave all your past sin behind. It doesn't define you anymore. [18:33] It's what Jesus did on the cross that counts. So forget the past, not in the sense of suppressing it, but in the sense of disregarding it.

Jesus has wiped the slate clean. What a relief. And instead, press on.

Strain forward. Run the race. If you have done well on the first few laps so far, great. But it means nothing when there are more laps to go.

So press on. But here's the good news. Press on because there is a prize waiting for you.

And you don't have to worry whether that gold medal might disappear. Because Jesus has already taken hold of it for you.

[19:38] He's simply waiting to pass it to you once you finish the race. that's what verse 14 is talking about. You see, here's how the logic works.

Imagine you are a builder and you're building a house for a client. But the rumor is this client is going bankrupt and there seems to be substance to those rumors.

So you're not sure if you're ever going to be paid. so you move slowly, you cut corners, you're always thinking about other jobs. The uncertainty has a demotivating effect on you and affects how you build.

But now, imagine this. Imagine that your client has actually put full payment into an escrow account. if I've understood the finance people rightly, that's when the money is put into the hands of a trusted third party.

It sits with them, protected and guaranteed. So you know with 100% certainty that the money is there and it will be released to you the moment you finish.

[21:02] That's the terms and conditions. conditions. And that will motivate you, won't it? Having that security won't make you lazy, but it will cause you to work harder, pulling you towards the finishing line in order to claim your guaranteed payment.

Or in this case, to use the language of verse 14, we will press on towards the goal to win the prize, for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

So my brothers and sisters, don't slack off, press on. As the theologian D.A. Carson once said, people do not drift towards holiness.

Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord.

And I won't read the rest of the quote which is on your handout, but that is exactly why we need to keep running.

[22:21] Otherwise, we will drift away from godliness, away from prayer, away from obedience to scripture, and delight in the Lord.

But what can help us press on? Well, that's where Paul's second directive comes in. Secondly, don't run alone, run with the mature.

That's what verse 17 is all about. Paul writes, join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

earlier on, I told you that Roger Bannister had done something no one else had ever done besides Landy, run a mile in under four minutes.

But he did not attempt it alone. Two friends ran with him on the day he broke the record, Chris Brasher and Chris Chatterway.

[23:43] And Brasher in particular was really important. His job was to set the pace for the first two laps. Not too slow, not too fast.

Now, Bannister, in recounting the race later on, would later admit that he felt so strong, he grew impatient with Brasher. Sometime during the first half of the race, he shouted, come on, faster.

But Brasher did not speed up. He kept the exact pace they had planned. And Bannister would later write, he made success possible.

Because by maintaining rhythm and not speeding up too quickly, he made sure Bannister had enough energy and momentum to cross the line in three minutes and 59 seconds.

Sure, Bannister was the one who broke the record. But he could only have done it because of who he ran with. And Paul says, in the Christian life, we need to do the same.

[24 : 57] We need to find mature, godly, running buddies. peace. Sometimes we think they're not necessary, right?

Because sometimes we feel strong. And as a result, we get impatient. Because we're so certain, we can sprint ahead spiritually, ahead of everyone else.

peace. But a godly running body will help us with words such as these. Don't rush past the Bible's wisdom.

Don't forget God-given limits and burnout. Don't compromise. They are the ones who enable us to get to the finishing line.

But how do you identify them? verse 15 helps us. The godly, mature, running body, Paul says, is the one who should take a view of such things.

[26 : 03] In other words, the mature Christian will think like Paul. He won't consider himself to have arrived. He won't necessarily be someone with fewer struggles.

But he will be someone who is unashamed and unapologetic that his one goal is to know Christ more and more. He will be someone, to borrow the language of Colossians 3, whose eyes will be fixed on things above, not on things below.

And he will be someone calling on you to do the same. Did you notice how Paul phrases the second half of verse 15? and if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

Now at first glance it might sound like Paul is pressuring everyone into group thing, but that's not what is happening. Rather he is simply doing what he's been consistently doing throughout the letter, calling on his fellow believers to have the same mindset of Christ.

Do you remember that's what he was asking the Philippian Christians to do back in 2 verse 2 and 2 verse 5? And Paul is saying that a mature godly running body wouldn't be someone who always affirms all your opinions.

[27 : 35] No, he or she will be willing to challenge you. If that's what it takes, to get you to have that forward-looking, Christ-centered, resurrection-shaped mindset all Christians should have.

But they will also be gentle with you. In verse 15, Paul expresses his conviction that God will make things clear in his time.

That suggests patience on his part, a willingness to wait for God to work rather than forcing you when you are fragile and struggling.

A mature, godly running body will do that for you too. So, don't run alone, run with the mature.

And my friends, you need to be aware that there are those you shouldn't run with as well. For did you notice Paul doesn't just instruct But warn?

[28 : 45] in verse 18, he tells us about those who live as enemies of the cross. Now, notice how Paul phrases it. He doesn't describe them simply as enemies of the cross, but as those who live as enemies of the cross.

In other words, the problem isn't so much with their theology as their pattern of living. These people live as if the Christian life is not cross shaped.

What does that mean? Well, from Philippians 2, it would mean they live by putting their own interests first. They were not willing to sacrifice for anyone else.

Or from Philippians 3, it would mean they live as if all that mattered was the here and now, not the future. That's why verse 19 also says things like their God is their stomach and their mind is set on earthly things.

Because all that matters is their present day appetites. I mean, just imagine a marathon runner who is controlled by his stomach.

[30 : 10] so on lap 20 or whatever as he runs, he suddenly sees his favorite charquetial store, so he decides to stop and order a dish.

Oh, who cares about the race? You know, the charquetial is calling my name. Not exactly the running body you would want, would you, if you're trying to finish to win the prize?

So this will be the kind of Christian today who won't encourage you to stretch yourself, but to avoid offering yourself in sacrifice.

Aiyah, you already work 40 hours this week, it's okay, take some me time. What for, you go sign up to help out with the youth group or attend that seminar? God wants you to be happy and rested, not exhausted.

Or perhaps it is someone who advises you to change churches, not based on biblical criteria, but on consumer preferences.

[31 : 14] Aiyah, why are you still going to that church? Every week only Bible, Bible, Bible, Bible, ma? I found a place down the road with better coffee and a shorter service. You know, it's got a better community vibe, one that will suit you just fine.

Why not just go be with people exactly like you? But here is the sobering reality, verse 19.

Their destiny is destruction. Their glory is their shame. In other words, they are not just slightly off course, they are heading somewhere tragic.

And if you follow them, you won't arrive safely either. And Paul warns against them, not because he is bitter, not because he is defensive, not because he feels threatened.

He warns them because he is heartbroken. Did you notice verse 18 again, how he speaks of them with tears?

[32 : 26] his warning then is not a vendetta. It's pastoral grief. It is the sorrow of someone who knows how attractive yet destructive the wrong way can be.

so today, I would like to encourage you to think a little more about who your running bodies are.

Who are you allowing to speak into your life? Which voices are you listening to? Because how you finish might depend on who you allow to be your mentors.

And I suppose broadly speaking, you can seek out two kinds of mature running bodies. First off, do you have parents?

By which I mean, is there someone whom you know is further ahead in the Christian race whom you could learn from? And remember, it's not merely about how knowledgeable or eloquent they are.

[33 : 41] Rather, the question you should be asking is do they live in line with the cross? Putting others first, being sacrificial, persevering in suffering, and so on.

These are the parents to adopt. And then second of all, do you have peers? Because as I said earlier, mature Christians doesn't necessarily have to be old in age, what is more important is this. Are you running with people who truly love Jesus and aren't just preoccupied with their work or career or hobbies or anything else that is distracting from Jesus?

And here's the other side of the coin. Is there someone you could be a good running body too? Is this someone whom you could help to be a pace setter, to reduce the wind of resistance they are facing, and keep pushing them on when they are struggling to live the Christian life?

Could you aspire to be a verses 12 to 14 kind of person so that you are able to say verse 17 to someone in your life?

[35 : 08] Because in this race, we all need parents and peers, and we all need to be parents and peers to someone else.

Now, that can feel daunting, can't it? Which is why we need post-last directive. Thirdly, don't forget the finish, get excited about heaven.

Now, did you notice that word citizenship in verse 20? In Paul's world, citizenship really mattered. Roman citizenship came with serious privileges, and Philippi was a Roman colony filled with families who were proud of having earned that status through military service.

So, when Paul talks about citizenship, he's touching on something very close to home. But Paul says, you know what? As a Christian, whether or not you are a Roman citizen, you've got something even better.

Your true citizenship in heaven. Which means your greatest loyalty, your real security, and the way you live your life now are shaped not by Rome, but by Christ.

[36 : 34] For that's where your true home is. It's not Rome. And I am a proud Gujing knight, but it is not Gujing either.

As a Christian, my true home is to be where Jesus is. And you know what will happen when we are home?

Verse 21 tells us, our lowly bodies will be transformed into bodies like Jesus. The resurrection body, Paul says, he has yet to obtain in verse 12, is finally received.

And that will mean bodies that will never ache or decay. But actually, we have to go further than that. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul talks about how our transformed bodies will be spiritual bodies.

That is, bodies completely animated by the Holy Spirit. So it is not just that we'll have bodies that won't fall sick. It will be that we will be embodied creatures who will sin no longer.

[37 : 51] We'll no longer be self-centered and self-absorbed and self-pitying kind of creatures. Instead, we will be completely centered and consumed by Jesus, his beauty and his glory.

We'll find that endless joy that comes from knowing Jesus fully. And so that's why verse 20, we eagerly await the coming of Jesus. we get excited about heaven because we're excited about seeing Jesus face to face. You know, some people worry that if Christians are too heavenly-minded, so to speak, they'll become indifferent to earthly concerns like working for justice, helping the vulnerable, and so on. people know. But actually, the example of the early Christians completely challenges that assumption. In the first couple of centuries, they are the ones who talk most about the resurrection and the life to come.

You know, the non-believers got sick of hearing them talk about this. But they are also the ones on record as rescuing abandoned infants, caring for the sick during plagues, and forming communities that cross class, ethnic, and gender lines.

[39 : 23] Because their excitement about heaven meant they also wanted to bring a little bit of heaven where there was hell on earth.

Because they knew Philippians 3, they knew there was a finishing line, and that there was a price, they kept running for Jesus and didn't give up, loving him and loving others.

So my brothers and sisters, remember the finish line and get excited about heaven. Don't slack off, but press on pursuing him wholeheartedly.

make our savior from heaven the shared pursuit of KEC. Because one day our faith will turn to sight and our prayers will turn to praise.

And we want all our running buddies to be there on that day. therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends.

[40 : 47] Shall we pray? Amen. Heavenly Father, I just pray now that indeed the words of Philippians 3 verse 12 to 4 verse 1 will sink deeply into us, give us a fresh resolve, a fresh motivation, a fresh vision to keep running this race.

And Father, for those who might be struggling in this race now, who find it so tiring and worrying, I pray, Lord, that you would lift their heads up, help them to see you, and surround them, Lord, with good running buddies so that they can keep running.

And for those of us who are tempted to slack off, to look behind and be satisfied, help us to remember we have not arrived yet, and help us to keep straining on towards that day when we will see you and enjoy the Father's embrace.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.