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Rick Myatt

CUT THAT TREE DOWN

Philippians 3:12-14

The late seminary professor, William Treadwell, said, “If we can convince people that we are onto something that’s full of joy, they’ll stampede one another to join us.” Years ago when I was single and in my mid 20’s I found myself during a Thanksgiving break at Stanford University, playing in a rugby tournament. Our team played 4 games in one day that day. The second game of the day during a moment when there was a brief pause in the game I had a realization. It hit me, “I actually don’t enjoy this game much.” You might wonder why I was playing rugby in the first place, given that reality. I had a friend named Eric who was one of the most charismatic people I’ve ever known. He was a natural leader. He was very funny, but the thing that made him such a magnet was his joy and his exuberance. He loved rugby, in fact, he played for a time on the national team. In his enthusiasm he swept people up in playing the game, and that’s how I ended up there. He first got Jerry and me to play on the Colorado State rugby team, then later got me to play on the team in the Stanford tournament. As I said, that day I realized that though Eric was enthusiastic about rugby, when I thought about it I really wasn’t. I decided in that moment that would be my last day of playing organized rugby. Too bad I didn’t decide that before the tournament. I went out with a bang. During the last game at one point as I was carrying the ball an opposing player nailed me with a crushing tackle. I ended up with a broken rib. That pretty well confirmed my decision to hang up my rugby cleats.

My friend Eric was confirmation of William Treadwell’s statement. He convinced people that he was onto something joyful, and people went right along with him, me included. Psalm 98:4 says, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth; burst into jubilant song with music.” When was the last time you burst out into song? Laurie does that, but I don’t. What strikes me is that the Psalm tells us to burst into jubilant song. Jubilant is a great word, isn’t it? How many times in your life have you been jubilant?

That Psalm isn’t just about singing, it’s about what’s in our hearts and about how we live. This past year has been one of the most difficult in recent memory for our family, beginning with my travails. We are hoping that 2024 will be much better. But whatever happens, I hope that next year I can be jubilant, I can live exuberantly. I hope that because it’s a more joyful way to live, but also because that’s what that Psalm calls on me to do. The question is, as we close out this year and look forward to a new year, how can we do that? How can we live with passion, with joy, with exuberance? Philippians 3:12-14 helps us know how we can do that.

FORGET WHAT IS BEHIND

Paul said in verse 12, “Not that I have already obtained all this.” He was referring to what he has said in verses 7-11, that he counts everything as loss for the sake of Christ and wants to know the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering. The words “all this” are not in the original text. Paul literally said, “Not that I have already obtained.” The translators reasoned that the word “obtained” requires an object. You have to obtain something, so they supplied “all this” to refer to what Paul had said in the context. That’s kind of right, but not exactly what he said.

I think this was a sort of idiomatic use of the word “obtained.” In English we might say “I don’t think I’ve already arrived” without explaining where we might want to arrive. What we mean is that we aren’t perfect and have growing to do. I believe Paul was saying the same thing. “I haven’t obtained” means, “I’m not perfect and I have some growing to do.” Paul had held himself up as an example in chapter 3, using his experience of trusting in the righteousness that Jesus Christ provides and considering all the things he was proud of before as being of no value. He wanted to make sure that no one thought that he believed that he was the pinnacle of Christian maturity, that he had arrived at the peak of growth. He was being humble and honest.

He is going to talk about how he moves forward in life and keeps growing. At the end of verse 13 he said a crucial thing. “One thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on.” A crucial part of being able to live with passion and joy is forgetting what is behind. By saying, “One thing I do” he was telling us that this is a crucial step to take. Whatever you do, be sure to leave the past behind.

When our kids got to the age where they could get their learner’s permit I found out that the world had changed since I was that age. When I was 15 we had to take a Driver’s Ed class in school, but it was all classroom work. The actual work of taking your life in your hands, giving the keys to the car to a clueless 15 year old and sitting in the car with them while they learned how to drive was the responsibility of parents. When it came my kids’ turn they were required to have driving lessons from a paid instructor. There used to be a show on TV about the world’s most dangerous jobs. I think driving instructor should have been on that show’s list.

I was saved a few terrifying moments because my kids’ first attempts at driving were directed by somebody else. In contrast, I provided my poor Dad with some harrowing moments. One Sunday he had me drive to church and he almost had a heart attack because he thought I was about to sideswipe several cars parked along the street. I didn’t see what the panic was about. I probably cleared them by a good 3 or 4 inches. No problem. Relax, Dad, I got this. Another memory was when I was making my first forays into the driving world, Dad had me drive him out to the golf course. The route to this particular course was through some barren land outside Bakersfield. It was a 2 lane road. One of the things I had to learn was use of the rear view mirror. I knew you had to check it regularly, but I had a tendency to either not look at it at all or to lock in on it. I don’t know why, but I’d look at it and get fascinated by whatever I could see back there. Just a quick glance didn’t feel like enough. That day I was driving, and wanting to be a good driver I looked in the rear view mirror. I looked longer than I should and as I was looking I let the car drift into the lane for opposing traffic. Fortunately there were no cars immediately ahead, but there were a couple a ways down the road, and my dad urgently exhorted me to get back in my lane and keep my eyes on the road. What I learned from that is you can’t effectively go forward while staring at what is behind you. Take your glance, then get your eyes back on the road.

That is as true in life as in driving. You can’t move forward in life if you’re staring at what is in the past. Take your glance at it, learn what you need to from it, but then get your eyes on where you’re going. For Paul, forgetting what lay behind involved letting go of both some bad and some good.

Paul had some serious regrets. In 1 Timothy 1:13 he said he had been “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man” because he had rejected and railed against Christ, and perpetrated violence and injustice on Christ’s followers. He could never make that completely right. He had some serious guilt. He had to rely on God’s grace and forgiveness and let go of what he could not erase from the past. He also had some failures in his life. In 2 Corinthians 11:30-33 he wrote, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.”

Christians often see this as a heroic escape by Paul. But he didn’t see it that way. He saw it as a weakness. He did so because as a brand new believer he was sure since God had specifically chosen him and given him a mission, and since he had more knowledge than anyone plus an irrefutable and dramatic story of how he came to Christ, that God was going to use him to start a huge movement. Jewish people were going to flock into the kingdom of God because of his story and his arguments. Instead, the people he preached to not only didn’t turn to Christ, they hated Paul and wanted to kill him. He fell flat on his face. It was a huge embarrassment for him. He saw it as a total failure, because that’s what it was.

In my first few years after college I worked in a ministry to students at Long Beach State University. In my last year in that ministry my boss told me he wanted me to teach a midweek Bible study on the campus for anyone who would come. He said it was clear I had ability as a teacher and they wanted to capitalize on that. So we rented a room on the campus and early in the semester we launched that study. The first day the room was packed. It was standing room only and there was tremendous energy there. After that day we briefly discussed that we might need to find a bigger room. That never became a problem. The next week there weren’t quite as many people there. That was expected because that was a pattern everywhere in the school. Everything was crowded the first week, but then it settled down. However, as the weeks passed, fewer and fewer people turned out for that Bible study. I have no memory of what I taught, but what I remember vividly was seeing the attendance at that thing slowly dwindling. At the end of the year 3 guys came to the last session. I had managed to almost totally empty that room. I knew those 3 were only there because they were friends who felt they should come out of loyalty to me, not because they found it to be a stimulating and profitable study. Well before the end of the year I had talked to my boss about just stopping because it was obvious the thing was dying. I have no idea why, but he insisted I see it through to the bitter end.

It was a big, fat failure. I came out of that experience convinced that I had no business ever trying to teach groups of people because I obviously didn’t have the gift for that. I have no doubt that Paul struggled with feelings of failure after the dumpster fire in Damascus. Both Paul’s flop and mine could well have kept either of us from ever attempting another stab at public ministry.

Paul also had some hurts in the past that he had to not camp out on. He had been falsely accused, had been beaten and jailed. At one point people tried to kill him by stoning him. Those are not easy things to “forget.” But Paul essentially said, “That’s past history. I’m living in the present and aiming at the future. I’m not going to fret over the past. I will forgive it and move on.”

Paul had his failures, but he also had an impressive string of successes. He had planted churches all over Asia Minor and parts of Europe. He had led many, many people to faith in Jesus. But those successes were also in the past. He didn’t want to dwell on that either. It’s fine to glance at successes in the rear view mirror, but don’t stare at them. You can’t move forward by staring at the past.

Forgetting is easier said than done sometimes. Paul referred to his failure, I told you about mine, because we remembered them long after they happened. Some things just don’t go away. One of my favorite Laurie stories happened years ago when we went to the airport to pick up our niece when she flew back to San Diego. Her flight was delayed a bit, so we had some time to wait at the airport. We found a bench to sit on, and at one point I had to go to the restroom. As I was walking back to our bench I noticed something on the floor. As I got close I saw a strange sight. It was a pair of woman’s underwear lying on the floor. What was that doing there? I figured it must have fallen out of some lady’s baggage. When I got back to our bench I told Laurie about what I had seen. She started laughing really hard. I thought it was curious, but not that funny, so her reaction seemed odd. Finally she stopped laughing long enough to say, “I think those are mine.” I was stunned by this revelation. I said, “How is that possible?” She informed me that apparently she had taken her pants off the night before and those underwear got stuck in the pant leg, though she didn’t realize it. She figured as she was walking they must have worked loose and fallen onto the concourse floor. Then came the real kicker. She said, “Rick, go pick them up.” I don’t think so.

I don’t believe I will ever forget that incident because it was so funny. The biggest highs and lows in life we’re also not likely to completely erase from our memory banks. That was clearly true for Paul and it is for us as well. To forget what is behind is to make a choice. It is to choose not to dwell on it. Choose not to let it determine who we are or what we do from this day forward. Like the rear view mirror, forgetting what is behind means glancing at it, learning from it and then moving on. Whether a success, a failure, or a painful hurt, that’s all irrelevant. It doesn’t matter. When I dwell on it, I’m making it all about me. If I dwell on hurts, for there surely were some, then I’m making it all about me. Freedom is found in making life about the real center of it all, Jesus Christ, not about me. Whether I succeeded or failed, whether I was hurt or blessed, isn’t the point. That is true for all of us. Let the past stay in the past. Glance at it to learn from it, then let it go and move on. If we don’t do that we will always be stuck in the past.

FOCUS ON THE GOAL

In verse 14 Paul said he pressed on “toward the goal.” He was using a sports analogy there. He pictured himself as a runner in a race. What does the runner focus on? He’s looking at the finish line. He’s looking at the goal. If he gets interested in anything else, he’s going to have a problem. He’s going to get distracted and won’t be able to do his best. Imagine someone running in the Carlsbad 5K race. Suppose this person wants to look at the merchandise in some of the shops he runs by, or passes by a restaurant that has some delicious looking food and he decides he wants to go in and have some of it. How well is he going to run the race? Obviously not well. He might take note of those establishments, but he focuses on the goal, winning the race.

Paul had a goal that he focused on. I like the way the New Living Translation puts verse 14. “I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.” Paul was locked in on a prize that awaited him in heaven. This was the true goal of his life. At one time Paul had been somebody in the world’s eyes. Among his people religious leaders were the most respected. They were the rock stars of their society, and he was becoming one of the top echelon. Getting there meant success, acclaim, respect, and even money. But now, as he said in verses 7-8 he counted all that as loss, as trash, compared to knowing Christ. He didn’t live for that anymore. He lived to know Christ, and he knew that some day, in God’s eternal kingdom, he would be rewarded for serving Christ. That was the prize he aimed at. All the stuff the world offers was just a distraction. Paul had a clear goal, and that goal was to serve Christ, to carry out the mission God had given him to the best of his abilities every day of his life, and to stand before Christ some day knowing he had done his best.

In his book, *The Rhythm Of Life*, Matthew Kelly wrote, “without a clear sense of the purpose and meaning of our lives, the emptiness is overwhelming. We try to fill the void with pleasure and possessions, but the emptiness is unaffected by such trivialities.” Pastor and author Mark Batterson wrote in his book, *Wild Goose Chase*, “You know why most of us never accomplish what we want? Because we don’t know what we want.” When we can’t identify the true goal of our lives we live by default. We get moved around by the winds and tides of this world.

A crucial component of living with joy and enthusiasm is having a goal, a purpose, that is clear and is worth our very lives. If we settle for some trivial, selfish, empty goal, it will never elevate us. We will end up knowing we are trivial. The goal must be something much bigger than ourselves, something enormous, something that lasts, something eternal. It needs to be worth giving everything we have and are to reach.

Without that goal we are just passing time. Have you ever noticed that in every sports league they have a championship every year? It’s because they want the games to have meaning. The only way to get people to sacrifice and work passionately is if they think playing the games means something significant, and the way you do that is you hold out the goal of becoming champion. My senior year in high school we had a very good baseball team. We believed we had the chance to win the league championship. We had 3 terrific starting pitchers that led the way. Unfortunately at the very beginning of our league season our top 2 pitchers got hurt, both out for the season. We were down to our third best pitcher and some younger guys to fill in. We played well, but without our best pitchers we just couldn’t compete with the best team in the league. With about 2 weeks left in the season we were eliminated from the race for the championship. There was a noticeable difference in practice those last couple of weeks. We tried our best, but the passion was gone because the goal had been lost.

Do you know what your goal is? Is it truly worth giving everything to? If you want to live with true passion, true enthusiasm, true joy in 2024 you absolutely must know what that goal is. And it needs to be eternal.

STRETCH OUT WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT

Pay attention to several words Paul used in these verses. In verse 12 he said “I press on.” In verse 14 he said again, “I press on.” At the end of verse 13 he spoke of “straining toward what is ahead.” In both instances where Paul said he pressed on he used the same word. It was a word that in some contexts meant to “persecute.” It meant “to impel, to set in rapid motion, to hurry.” It spoke of vigorous activity. In one ancient document it was used to describe a lion chasing after a person. That’s how it came to mean to persecute someone. It was to chase after them to harm them.

This is talking about sprinting after something, running after it with all your might. As I was thinking about these verses I thought about how often I sprint. The answer was basically never. These days I can pull a muscle getting out of bed, so what do you think is going to happen if I try to sprint? It’s not going to be pretty.

Other than in the context of sports, I had a hard time thinking of when I have sprinted after something. I remembered one incident. When I was in grad school I worked at a grocery store for a time. I worked at an Albertson’s. They gave us a blue apron to wear, though I’m not sure why. One day while I was working the assistant manager suddenly said to me, “Rick, come with me. I need your help.” As I followed him outside the store he explained he had seen a shoplifter steal some items and he wanted my help stopping the guy. As soon as we walked out of the store the guy spotted us and took off running. The assistant manager started after him and yelled to me, “Let’s go!” I joined the chase. I was faster than the assistant manager so I soon passed him. I chased that guy for a couple hundred yards down the street, but I caught him and held on to him until the manager got there. It only occurred to me after we were escorting him back to the store that he could have had a weapon.

My point is that when I went after that guy it was not a leisurely walk down the street. It was a flat out sprint. I ran as hard and as fast as I could, and by the time I caught him I was panting big time. That is the way Paul depicted his approach to life. He went full speed ahead, expending all the energy he had to reach the goal.

The other term he used that is translated “straining toward what is ahead” literally meant to stretch out. Recently I was watching a football game. I know, gasp, right? Hard to believe, but it’s true. Anyway, at one point in this particular game there was a play where a receiver caught a pass and broke free down the sideline. As he neared the end zone a defensive player was streaking toward him from the middle of the field, aiming to knock him out of bounds before he could reach the goal line. The defender was almost there when the receiver launched himself toward the goal. He went totally horizontal with his arms stretched out at maximum length trying to reach the ball across the goal line. The defender hit him and he flew out of bounds but as he did so the ball grazed the pylon at the corner of the endzone, making it a touchdown. Picture in your mind that receiver totally horizontal, stretching with all his might. That is what this word means. That is how Paul lived and pursued his mission.

Remember where Paul was when he wrote these words. He was in chains. He had been a prisoner for several years. What happened to him was totally unjust. Now he was awaiting trial and the man who would decide his fate was that paragon of virtue and justice, Nero, who didn’t like Christians. Paul lived with great passion, tremendous exuberance and boundless enthusiasm, and those things had nothing to do with his circumstances. His circumstances should have made him angry, frustrated, depressed and complaining. Instead, he was stretching out, running with all his might to fulfill his mission in whatever way he could regardless of what his circumstances were.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 says, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” That was what Paul was doing. He was going with all his might after the goal of fulfilling his mission. In his book, *Journey Of Desire*, John Eldredge wrote, “I continue to be stunned by the level of deadness that most people consider normal and seem content to live with.” This is not what God wants for us. He wants us fully alive, fully present wherever we are, pulsating with life and with passion for what he has given us to do today.

CONCLUSION

Charles Flood wrote a book titled *Lee: The Last Years* in which he recounted the last 5 years of the life of famous Confederate general Robert E. Lee. Lee only lived 5 years after the end of the Civil War. In the book Flood told how Lee dedicated himself to healing the wounds of the war and bringing the nation back together. One time Lee visited a friend from the south, a true southern woman. She showed him what was left of a large tree in front of her house. She bitterly told him that the Union artillery had shelled the area and had destroyed this magnificent tree, leaving only the shattered trunk and a few limbs standing. She waited for him to comment on how terrible this was. After a pause he said, “Cut it down, my dear madam, and forget it.”

To live with jubilation and exuberance we need to let go of the past. We need to believe in and rejoice in the forgiveness we have because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. We need to zero in on the goal, the purpose of our lives, a purpose of immeasurable and eternal significance. Then we need to give it everything we have every single day.