

**"Pressing on with the Mission"
"Help! I've Become a Spiritual Fossil!"
The Philippians 3:10-16**

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Do you know what a coelacanth is? [Slide #2] You've probably seen pictures of them or news stories where some deep sea fisherman pulls up this ancient looking fish. Coelacanths are prehistoric fish that belong to a group whose other members are extinct. They are relics from a bygone era. They are living fossils; unchanged for eons.
- To me, this describes the spiritual state of a lot of Christians, too many Christians. They are living fossils, unchanged for months, years, decades. Their spiritual life frozen in time. No spiritual motion, no development, no spiritual growth. They are in a state of spiritual stasis. They have become, for all intents and purposes, spiritual coelacanths, living spiritual fossils. Spiritual relics from another time.
- Deep down maybe you know this is you. There's nothing fresh about your spiritual walk with Christ. Been that way for longer than you can remember. It's all stale and moldy. And it's not that you don't want newness and freshness and growth. You do. You see the spiritual vibrancy in others and long for it but the ruts you're in are so deep they seem impossible to escape. Maybe without even realizing how it's happened you've become a spiritual fossil.
- It seems to me that this idea of spiritual stasis, spiritual fossilization, is at the heart of Paul's words in **Philippians 3**. The big idea of **Philippians 3:10-16** is simply this...[Slide #3]

Big Idea

- **Pressing on with the mission means avoiding spiritual stasis**
- Spiritual stasis is death on a personal, individual level. It's also death to the mission of the church. In order for Philippian church to press on in its partnership with Paul for the sake of the gospel Paul needs them growing, maturing in Christ. If we want to see the church on the mission Jesus launched it means you and me, together, avoiding spiritual stasis.
- Obviously Paul didn't have coelacanths in mind when he wrote these words. He had in mind a group of people within the Philippian church who thought they had arrived spiritually. Look at **verse 15-16**. He says *all of us who are mature should take such a view of things*—meaning the things he's mentioned in the previous verses, the things we'll talk about in a moment. *All of us who are mature should take such a view of things*. Spiritual maturity or lack thereof is his focus.
- And then he says, *and if on some point you think differently* [implying that some in the church didn't think like him] *that too God will make clear to you*. In other words, some of the people Paul wrote to thought they were spiritually mature but in reality they really weren't mature because they thought differently about things than Paul. They had fossilized spiritually. And worst of all. They didn't even know it. He prays that God would make it clear to them that their spiritual stasis was in fact a sign of their spiritual immaturity in Christ.

- Here’s the thing about thinking you’ve arrived spiritually. The moment you think you’re there is the moment you’re a spiritual fossil. The moment you think you know what you need to know in Christ, that you’ve got it all figured out, that you’re at the top of the growth curve, is the moment you spiritually fossilize. That’s the moment you become a spiritual relic. Listen to me. “There is no point at which the Christian can sit back and say that the goal has been reached.”¹ There is no stasis in the Christian life. You’re either growing in grace or you are in the process or have become a spiritual fossil.

Transition

Look at the text. **Philippians 3:10-16.**

Organizational Sentence

- **Two ways to avoid spiritual stasis**
- The **first** is found in **verses 10-11**. If you want to avoid becoming a spiritual fossil, stuck in a state of spiritual stasis, then it means **aching to know Christ better and better**. Listen. **Philippians 3:10.**

Main Points

- Paul says *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.* The way you avoid becoming a spiritual fossil, a spiritual relic from another era is by aching, longing, desiring, yearning to know Christ better and better and better. *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*
- Do you sense the ache in Paul’s heart? More than anything this man wants to know Christ. Do you know how many years Paul had been a Christian when he wrote these words? Usually we associate these words with a new believer. These aren’t the words of a new baby in Christ who’s just starting on the journey of knowing Christ. Paul had been a believer for about 30 years when he said these words. *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.* When was the last time you cried from the depths of your heart with an ache to know Christ more and more and more?
- Remember back in **verses 7-8** Paul said that it was worth losing everything for the sake of gaining Christ, for the sake of knowing the surpassing greatness of Christ. *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 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.* We ache and desire for long for the things we value. Can you say that about Christ?
- The way I see it, the way Paul seems to present it here, is that the reason people fossilize spiritually is because they stop yearning, aching for Christ and they begin yearning, aching for other things. Paul’s greatest ambition in life was to know Christ. The kind of knowing

¹ Marshall, p. 94.

Paul has in mind when he says *I want to know Christ* in [verse 10](#) is a knowing that implies a personal relationship between the knower and the known.²

- I have in my library at home a 741 page biographical masterpiece of Teddy Roosevelt written by [Edmund Morris](#). In terms of sheer number of pages it's the largest biography I own. When I finished reading Morris' Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Roosevelt, by the end of it, I felt like I had come to know the man Teddy Roosevelt. But I didn't really know Teddy Roosevelt.
- In the same way that a person might read about Teddy Roosevelt and come to know about him but not really know him, a person can come to know about Christ but not really know Christ. The kind of knowing Paul has in mind when he says *I want to know Christ* is an experiential knowing in the context of an intimate personal relationship. To know Christ is not to meet him at some camp when you're a kid—or at Districts—and never to have connection, relationship with him the rest of your life. That's not knowing Christ.
- When Paul says *I want to know Christ* he's speaking of an “ongoing experience which deepens and matures like the experience of getting to know any other person.”³ Paul's deepest longing, deepest ache in life is to know Christ, a person, more and more and more. There is nothing static about knowing Christ; you're either growing in relationship with him or your relationship with him is in process of becoming fossilized.
- Are you with me? Listen. Time to pull off all the masks you've put on in coming here. Is this the goal of your life? Are the rhythms of your day arranged in such a way that knowing Christ more is even possible? You don't magically get to know a person better. It won't just happen. Evaluate your spiritual affections. If you aren't aching to know Christ more and more something's not right. If you don't have feelings for your boyfriend or your girlfriend or your spouse you would say something's wrong. If you aren't aching, longing to know Christ more something is not right. And you're in danger of fossilizing spiritually.
- So what exactly does it mean to know Christ? Paul explains what it means in rest of [verses 10-11](#). Look at what Paul says. Knowing Christ means experiencing the *power of his resurrection*; “the power that comes to believers on the basis of Christ's resurrection.”⁴
- To know Christ is to experience this *incomparably great power*, the *working of God's mighty strength*—the same strength that raised Christ from the dead. Remember what Paul writes in [Ephesians 1:17-20](#)? *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.*
- In other words, the same power that raised Christ from the dead is made available to the Christian believer so that they might, through the exercise of that power in day to day life be

² Reinecker, p. 557.

³ Marshall, p. 91.

⁴ Fee, p. 329.

raised to newness of life.⁵ To know Christ is to experience this power applied to old sinful patterns of behavior, old ways of living, old ways of thinking, so that the end result is something new, a life that is fundamentally different, altered, changed compared to that life prior to knowing Christ and experiencing that power.

- If you don't know or have never experienced this power then you don't know Christ. And if you do know Christ and it's been a while since you've experienced the power of his resurrection then you've fossilized spiritually. In either case the response is the same. You give up the game of control, you confess to God that you're not making it without him, you surrender to him and then invite him and his *incomparably great power* to begin to work.
- I think Paul would say that if you haven't or aren't experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection in your life it's because you've strayed from the path that leads to the exercise of that power. The path to that power is explained by the two additional phrases at the end of [verse 10](#), the *fellowship of sharing in his sufferings* and *becoming like him in his death*.
- These two are the gateways to experiencing Christ's resurrection power. Think about these two things in terms of Christ. How does Christ get to the resurrection? Christ's resurrection is a direct result of him having suffered to the point of death on a cross. By analogy then, the only way for us as his followers to experience his resurrection power is through the same path of suffering and conformity to him in death.⁶
- Let me explain it like this. Sin is like a [Krispy Kreme](#). It tastes so good going down but in the end? It's death. Most of us say no once or twice and then eat the Krispy Kreme, we indulge in the sin and regret it instantly. And then we lament and complain—where's God's power? Why can't we beat this thing? In order to experience God's *incomparably great power* that helps us say no to the tasty good [Krispy Kreme](#) we've got to invite Jesus into the experience of saying no and ask him to help us persevere in saying no. When that "no" is sustained over time, sometimes it's the hardest thing in the world, we experience a bit of what Christ did as he suffered for us. We become like him in his death in the sense that with his help we die to sin in that moment. The only way to get to resurrection is death. The only way to get to resurrection power is death to sin in the moment.
- When we follow the path that Christ took toward resurrection our intimacy with him is fostered. We start saying things like, Jesus now I understand a little bit more what your suffering for me was like. And through the sustained "no", with Jesus' help, the resurrection comes—just as it did for Christ. As we conform to Christ in saying no to sin God unleashes the same power that raised Christ from the dead in our life which makes victory over the Krispy Kreme urge possible. And over time, through repetition, the thought of even eating a Krispy Kreme becomes disgusting to us. Do you see how this works? The burden, the suffering if you will, of saying no to sin and yes to God are part of the sufferings in which Christ shared and bring you into closer union with Christ.⁷ *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

⁵ Martin, p. 152.

⁶ Fee, p. 332.

⁷ Marshall, p. 92.

- Our ultimate hope as Christian believers, as Paul expresses it in [verse 11](#), is that one day this little community theater drama of death and resurrection over sin gets played out on the silver screen—actual life and death. Physical resurrection. Paul’s *if somehow* of [verse 11](#) doesn’t imply doubt, as if Paul might not experience resurrection. Rather, “the resurrection of believers is intimately tied to their first being conformed to Christ’s death in their life. Without death of this kind there is no physical resurrection on the back end of things.”⁸

Transition

Are you with me? This passage is so rich. Remember, two ways to avoid spiritual stasis—spiritual fossilization. The [first](#) is to ache to know Christ more and better. The [second](#) comes from [verses 12-16](#). [Slide #5] **Never, ever, ever be satisfied with yesterday’s grace.**

- [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. 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. 15 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*
- You remember [Uncle Rico](#) from the movie [Napoleon Dynamite](#)? Uncle Rico is this guy who’s stuck in 1982 and the glory days of his high school football career. The scene when he chucks that steak at Napoleon? That’s one of the best movie scenes ever. Instead of living in the present or even living for the future Uncle Rico is consumed with longing for the past, of what might have been. He even tries to build a time machine so that he can go back and re-live 1982. He’s a man stuck in time.
- There are a lot of Christians just like Uncle Rico. Their sight is firmly fixed on yesterday’s grace. They long for yesterday’s grace. They long for the good old days. You hear them say things like, “Boy, if we could go back and experience that again wouldn’t that be great.” You do that, you think that way and you can pretty much guarantee you’ve become a spiritual fossil. How in the world do you press on with the mission if you’re fascinated with yesterday’s grace? If you want to avoid spiritual stasis, avoid becoming a spiritual coelacanth, then never, ever be satisfied with yesterdays’ grace. Instead, press on toward the goal. Forget what is behind. Strain toward what is ahead. Press on toward the goal and the prize.
- I love how things work out. We’ve got this thing called the Olympics going on right now. Races galore. Paul uses the image of a race in [verses 12-14](#), in this case a footrace, to describe how we are to approach the Christian life—this is the way to avoid spiritual fossilization. Instead of being satisfied with yesterday’s grace we are to, like a runner, press on and pursue the finish line and the prize that awaits those who run.
- Paul says in [verse 10](#) that what is seeking after, the prize that he wants, he hasn’t got it yet. He says he hasn’t obtained all this. He hasn’t been made perfect—in other words he hasn’t been brought to complete maturity so that he always says no to sin and yes to God. And it’s precisely because he has not yet arrived at the goal, the goal of completely and perfectly knowing Christ, that Paul sets out to run. *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have*

⁸ Fee, p. 336.

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 prize is not specified in the text but context dictates the prize is knowing Christ. The ultimate goal of the Christian life isn't perfection or eternity or heaven or being saved from hell. The ultimate goal of the Christian life is Christ. And knowing him perfectly, fully, results in all those other things—knowing him leads to eternity and perfection and being saved from hell. But the prize is Christ.
- Paul has every muscle, every nerve, like a runner, singularly focused on that goal in hopes of winning that prize.⁹ The flow of thought in [12-14](#) goes like this. “I have not attained...I pursue that I may reach...I do not reckon to have reached...I pursue toward the goal.”¹⁰ All Paul says, every word in this section, is there to express his desire to attain the goal; the goal of knowing Christ. No distractions. No looking back. Instead, straining, pressing on, pursuing the finish line and the prize which is knowing Christ.
- I realize I'm dating myself with this one. Remember [Rosco P. Coltrane](#) from the Dukes of Hazard? Paul is in hot pursuit. He wants the prize.
- The prize is the ultimate reason for running, right? Look at [verse 12](#). Paul says he was grasped, he was apprehended by Christ for the very purpose of knowing Christ. *But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* Christ first took hold of Paul so that he might know Christ. And the same is true for us. So, like Paul, we are to press on like a runner in a race for the purpose of gaining the prize, the prize of knowing Christ. No satisfaction with yesterday's grace. There is grace still to be had. No contentment with what we already know of Christ. There is still more of Christ to know. So we pursue more of Christ. We pursue more grace. We press on for more grace, for more of Christ. And we give that pursuit everything we have. We hold nothing back so that people see we are strenuously making progress in the goal of knowing Christ.¹¹
- Listen to me. If the ultimate goal of the Christian life for you is something other than pursuing and knowing Christ you will fossilize spiritually—and it is a sign of spiritual immaturity. The implications of [verses 15-16](#) are staggering. Look at verses 15-16. *All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.* In other words, “this is precisely the frame of mind that characterizes the mature in Christ.”¹² Don't ever be satisfied with yesterday's grace. Pursue more grace. More of Christ.
- As [Don Carson](#) puts it, “It is a shocking thing for Christians to have to admit that they have grown little in their knowledge of Jesus Christ...If you have been on the same plateau of both knowledge (doctrine) and experience (life) for the past twenty years, there is something dreadfully wrong. It is mandated of all of us that we grow: *all of us who are mature should take such a view of things.*”

⁹ Fee, p. 346.

¹⁰ Silva, p. 173.

¹¹ Marshall, p. 95.

¹² Fee, p. 356.

- There’s a line in a poem by [Robert Browning](#) that reads like this, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”¹³ What are you reaching for in this race called the Christian life? For the past? For past glories? Yesterday’s grace? Or is your reach stretched out toward Christ who is our ultimate prize and the joy of heaven? Two ways to avoid spiritual stasis. Ache to ache to know Christ better and better. Never, ever, ever be satisfied with yesterday’s grace.

Conclusion

- I want to conclude this morning with a letter writer [Chris Tomlinson](#) wrote to [Lindsey Vonn](#) upon hearing her response to her gold medal in the down hill. The letter starts with Vonn’s own words. “I’ve given up everything for this. It means everything to me. It’s why I work hard. I got what I came here to do. I got a gold medal; I have what I want.”
- And then Tomlinson’s letter. “**Tears have a funny way of releasing things.** Lindsey Vonn’s tears were no different. As she stood at the bottom of the mountain at Whistler, Olympic Gold as her prize, the Women’s Downhill Champion’s tears shone brightly in the sun.
- **She must have been thinking of all the years she spent training for this moment.** She must have been thinking of all the expectations that were placed on her shoulders as the favorite for these Games. She must have been thinking of the pressure that mounted as she sustained a shin injury just two weeks before the Games began.
- **She had been single-minded in her goal of becoming the world’s best women’s downhill skier.** She had disciplined her body and her emotions for years as she trained for these Games. And she had persevered through intense suffering and setback. And now she stood as Olympic Champion.
- **Simply put, Lindsey’s tears were tears of joy, and release, and satisfaction.** She had every right to shed them, for this was her moment, one to be applauded and admired. Her tears were the sweet, crowning jewels of her Olympic glory.
- **Here’s a truth we all know,** and one Lindsey either knows already or will soon discover: Olympic glory fades. So does the glory from being a successful preacher, or pastor, or writer, or musician, or businessman, or businesswoman, or student. We all strive for perishable wreaths at different times in our lives. And we strive for them in vain.
- **You know well the passage where Paul compares himself to an athlete.** He writes: Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable (1 Cor 9:24-25).
- **This echoes another passage,** perhaps penned by Paul as well: Let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross (Heb 12:1-2).
- **So we gain an imperishable wreath** when we are single-minded in our pursuit: to obtain the prize promised by the gospel. We gain an imperishable wreath when we lay aside the sin that

¹³ Martin, p. 155.

clings to us, exercising self-control in all things. And we gain an imperishable crown when we persevere in our race, enduring suffering as it comes, following Jesus every step of the way.

- **We may imagine that the bottom of our mountains will bring tears as joy and relief as well.** But the tears we shed are simply an expression of a deeper longing within us, a longing that will one day be satisfied. Our tears today are just like anything in this world: shadows of a brighter reality, or echoes of a sweeter song.
- **Our prize is a place with a Person,** and this Person will “wipe away every tear from their eyes ... neither shall there be crying ... for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). It is in that day that we will wear our imperishable crowns of righteousness, because of Him and for His sake. And in that day we will be satisfied by our greatest joy: Jesus.
- **Congratulations to you, Lindsey.** Your achievement is inspiring and well-deserved. And as the glory of your triumph begins to fade, may you find (or continue to find) Jesus as your imperishable wreath. And may we all see your inspiring example as a reflection of the higher call we have on our lives. May we run the race with single-mindedness, exercising self-control, disciplining our bodies for the sake of the gospel, and persevering through suffering, all so that we might obtain the prize we seek: eternity in the presence of the One whose glory never fades.”¹⁴

¹⁴ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2010/02/18/i/i%E2%80%99ve-given-up-everything-for-this/>