

# Finding God's Peace in Tumultuous Times: A Pandemic Devotional from the New Testament Book of Philippians

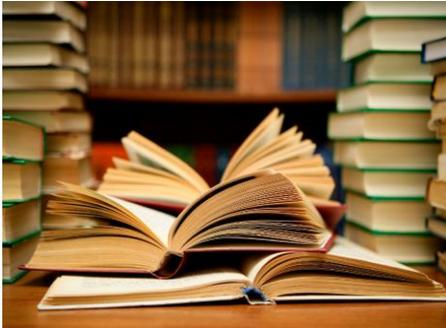
Devotional 7

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Striving. What are you striving toward? What are you working on?

I think of the years I was striving toward a doctoral degree while still working in full-time ordained ministry. Though I didn't start out thinking I would seek an advanced degree. I was drawn to learn and I wanted to study.



I especially wanted to study with author and professor of Philosophy, Dallas Willard. And because he taught a course at Fuller Seminary, that led me into the Doctor of Ministry program there.

But it wasn't easy. As if completing thousands of pages of reading and writing hundreds of pages of papers for each course wasn't enough, completing the final dissertation was enormously challenging.

I needed to be focused. I needed to be committed. I needed to be disciplined. I had to keep the goal fixed in my mind, which meant keeping the intermediate-stage goals in mind. There were many nights when I wanted to just sit and watch TV or play music. But I had a goal. I had to keep reading and writing.

As I look back on that time now, I believe that having that clear focus and goal propelled me forward to learn and grow and become a better person as well as a better minister. Having the goal helped me tremendously.

What things have you worked toward that required focus, commitment, and discipline? Some train to run a marathon, others to learn an instrument, or play a piece of music. Some work toward passing a test or getting a certification. Others might have a goal of fixing up an area in the house. What things have you worked toward? What have you had to strive to achieve? Are there new things you have begun striving for since the pandemic hit?

The word "strive" seems to imply more than just effort, but struggle. Striving isn't easy. It requires our all-out dedication.

As you consider the pandemic, what things are people in the world today striving for? For some it is merely a striving for survival: taking steps to wear a mask, practicing social distancing, and buying and using lots of disinfectant. For others, it's economic survival: getting enrolled for unemployment, developing a strategy for the business to weather the storm, and finding a job.



There is nothing wrong with having multiple goals -- in fact, in most cases it is probably a good thing. But in this passage of Scripture from Philippians Paul talks about organizing our life toward just one goal. He describes it as the "upward" call. With this perspective on life, all other goals are intermediate steps toward the one big goal. Paul uses the images of runners leaning toward the tape at the finishing line and running the race in the athletic games of his day. Paul talks about effort -- a sustained, focused, effort toward this one goal. He says it a couple of times in a couple of different ways. He qualifies it; he says he hasn't yet achieved the goal. But he lays his life before the Philippians and before us as an example of a life well-lived. He describes life as a

walk and as a race. He describes just one goal as the overarching target that we should strive toward – all other goals should fit within this one.

And the result is blessing. There is the blessing that comes at the end of life – but there is also the blessing of knowing Jesus in this life. Together they are all-consuming for Paul. And as we will see in the next chapter, the result is peace and joy.

The main point in this devotional is that when our striving is in line with God's call upon our lives – when it lines up with the heavenward call – then strength is given to carry us through the struggle – then blessings are given to sustain our effort – then we become better people, the people God created us to be and we experience NOW, in this life, peace and joy. We are also drawn heavenward preparing to join our Lord in the next life before His throne.

**Read, Reflect and Apply\*\*** – As you begin this time in God's word, you might ask God to help you be honest with yourself. It is easy for us to justify what we want to do and then ask God to bless it. And yet, if we are not following His calling upon our lives there will be trouble. Ask God to help you see your life and your priorities as they truly are. And ask God to guide you to how you might more fully follow Paul's example in your own life. Then listen and be open to His call upon you.

\*\*Questions preceded by two asterisks indicate application relevant to your life.

**Read Philippians 3:12-21 and then consider these questions.**

## **Verses 12-16**

### **The Goal of Paul's Life – His Example for Ours**

Paul reiterates the same points in multiple ways in quick succession here.

\*In what ways does Paul describe the current state of his progress?

\*In what ways does Paul describe his efforts toward the goal?

\*In what ways does he describe the goal?

\*In what ways is this a future goal and in what ways is it a goal for the present? Remember to view Paul's statements here in the context of this whole chapter.

\*In your own words, describe what Paul is saying about his life in these verses. What do you think that looks like practically speaking?

\*\*How is this similar, how is it different from the way you view your life?

Paul uses a word play – saying as he is trying to take a hold of his goal, while at the same time Christ has already "taken hold" of him.

\*What do you think that means? How has Christ laid hold of Paul (other translations might say "made me His own" or "possess")?

\*\*Think about the things you are doing, how you spend your time. What things are you working on, toward? Is there a theme or a pattern in these things? Do they fit together under a single goal?

\*\*What would it take for you to have a more single-minded focus, commitment and discipline to strive to experience the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ?

**\*\*How does it make you feel that even the Apostle Paul says he is not yet where he needs to be, he has not yet reached “perfection” or a better translation: “maturity”?**

Read verse 15 again: “Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you.” (New Living Translation).

**\*What is the connection between maturity and what Paul is advocating here?**

The ESV Study Bible says this about verse 15: “Paul is saying, in effect, ‘If you are really perfect/mature, you will realize you are not yet perfect/mature.’”

**\*\*What do you find challenging about this? What do you find encouraging?**

In verse 16 Paul says: “Let us hold true to what we have attained.” (ESV)

**\*What does that mean in the context of this passage? How does holding true to what we have attained relate to pursuing the “Prize” or upward calling of God?**

**\*\*How would you describe the upward call of God upon your life?**

## **Verses. 17-21**

### **The Earthly Walk of a Citizen of Heaven**

Paul encourages the Philippians to follow the example of those who “walk” according to his example. This is now different than the running analogy in the previous paragraph.

**\*What does it suggest to you that Paul describes the Christian life as a “walk” (which is the word literally used in the Greek here)?**

**\*\*Who do you know who is living as a Christian example that is worthy to follow?**

**\*\*Would you tell others to follow your example? Why or why not?**

**\*What two groups of people does Paul describe in these verses? What are the characteristics of each?**

**\*What makes those who Paul describes here enemies of the cross of Christ?**

**\*What makes those who Paul describes here citizens of heaven?**

**\*\*Given Paul has already said he isn’t perfect, he hasn’t arrived in this, what do you see in yourself that is similar to the “enemies of the cross”? What do you see in yourself that is similar to the “citizens of heaven”?**

### **Closing Application and Prayer**

**\*\*On the one hand, this passage can be very challenging and convicting when we see those aspects of our lives that are not lined up under the goal of pressing on toward our heavenly calling. On the other hand, there is much hope and promise for those striving to be on this path. As you close, talk to God about the path of your life – what are you striving for? Can you identify the steady, direction and progress of a walk toward Jesus Christ? Talk to God about the “steps” you need to take to walk more fully in the footsteps of Paul as he walks in the footsteps of Jesus.**