

Future Focus

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Alice. Martin Luther, the famous German reformer of the church in the 16th century, once said, I have two days in my calendar, this day and that day. By this day, he meant today, he meant the present, what was going on at that time. By that day, he meant that future day of Jesus' return. That day, which the Bible teaches that everything is heading towards, that day that will mark the close of history as we know it, that day when Jesus returns, bringing about the perfect restoration that God has promised, the restoration of all things, as Jesus comes back as the perfect and righteous judge. I have two days in my calendar, Luther said, this day and that day. As we continue through this letter of the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi, I think we see that that is a quote, that is an approach to life that Paul would heartily agree with, isn't it? We finished last week speaking about that resurrection that Jesus offers, that promised future for those who know him, for those who trust in him. We've heard already in this letter so far, Paul speaking about the day of Christ, repeated in chapter one and again in chapter two. Paul absolutely has that day, the day of Jesus' return in his calendar. And again, throughout this letter, we've seen how that day then makes all the difference to this day, that the future has a real effect on the present, as Paul has been encouraging the church to live out their faith, to work out their salvation in the present, in the here and the now, in this day, in view of what's to come. The second chapter, sorry, the second half of chapter three that we're particularly looking at this morning really builds on that future focus. Paul is really emphasizing how he is looking forward and he is encouraging the church and he is encouraging us to be looking forward to that day. And again, seeing the difference that that day makes, living our whole lives in light of what is to come. We could kind of summarize the message of this passage by saying that having a future focus is an essential aspect in growing and living as a Christian. I'm just going to move over here because I'm on a creaky floorboard here, it seems. So there you go. I feel a bit more solid there. Okay. Yeah. If we, and again, so this is the idea that we're looking at this morning, this day and that day. And I think if we're kind of honest with ourselves as we, as we begin, probably it is this day. It is the present that is what takes up the majority of our, of our thoughts, of our energy, of our focus. Most of our life is spent probably considering this day, what's happening, you know, this week. How are we going to get through the next couple of days? What's our, what's our plans for this afternoon? This day often looms large in our mind, doesn't it? And really, so what Paul wants to do here is kind of lift our focus to keep that, that day, that day, the day of Jesus's return, right at the front of our minds, the promise of what he will do in the future at the front of our thoughts. And it's with that future focus then, Paul says, we're able to live properly in these present times. So let's dig into what Paul focuses on and calls us to focus on as we think about this future focus. We're going to look at four different areas. And the first one is this. The first is, is confidence in a future focus. Why is it that we're able to look forward with confidence to what's to come? And what Paul makes really clear here, that in order to look forward with confidence, we first need to make sure that we have this, this kind of gospel foundation in place.

Have a look at verse 12 there. If you've got your, your Bibles in front of you, Paul is speaking about, coming straight on from talking about the resurrection that Jesus promises. That's what we left up last week. And Paul goes straight on to say in verse 12, not that I have already obtained this or I'm already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Paul is highlighting there, isn't he, this need to keep on looking forward that this isn't all there is. The resurrection, which is so vitally important. Paul's saying, I'm not there yet. The perfection that God has promised to bring about in his people. God says, I've not obtained that yet.

These are our future things. Paul and none of us have reached our final destination. Again, remember, it's this future focus. Why can we, Paul, have confidence in this future? How is Paul able, as he says, to press on in light of that with confidence? Well, as he says here, I press on to make it, I'll make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Paul is not looking ahead to the future, to this resurrection, to this perfection, to all the good stuff that God has promised. He's not looking ahead with uncertainty or with anxiety or wondering if he's going to make it or not. Will he really get there? No, Paul knows that that is his destination, not because of what he's done, not because he deserves it, not because Paul has claimed it for himself, but because, as he says, Jesus has claimed Paul for himself, because Jesus Christ has made me his own. That is where Paul's confidence is in what Christ has done. At the end of our passage, verse 20, Paul really makes kind of the same point. He says, but our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a saviour, the Lord

[6 : 25] Jesus Christ. Again, what Paul is saying there is that we can have confidence in this future focus because that future is secure in Christ. If our trust is in Jesus, we are citizens of heaven, all because of what he has done, because in the gospel, he, Jesus Christ, has made us his own.

When I was at secondary school, I don't imagine this scheme lasted that long, but every secondary school pupil in Britain was given a kind of a reddish-brown national record of achievement folder.

I don't know if anyone's still got any of these at home. The idea was that you would kind of put in it a record of all the kind of important and impressive things that you'd done, and then in the future, you'd take it with you to kind of interviews, and you'd show potential employers what a great kind of valuable person you were. Unfortunately for me, my kind of admin skills at secondary school are about the same as they are now, really, and so this folder just got left kind of on the floor in a corner of a room somewhere with absolutely nothing in it, and occasionally I would just kind of glance it out of the corner of my eye, or it would come to mind, or I'd see someone walk past with a kind of bulging record of achievement folder, and I'd remember about this folder that I'd done nothing about, and it would give me this kind of twinge of anxiety about the future. Was this failure to record all my achievements, or potentially even achieve them in the first place, would that exclude me from whatever it was that I was wanting to do in the future? We can be easily anxious about the future, can't we? We can be uncertain about what is next, and certainly people worry about the eternal future, ultimately about death itself, and yet in this passage, Paul wants us to look forward with confidence. Paul wants us to remember our eternal home is just that, it's our home, not because of anything we've achieved. We don't have to have some kind of folder full of all the good stuff that we've done so that God will let us in. No, it's made possible through Jesus, and so we can have confidence in a future focus. As you said, this passage is all about encouraging us to look forward, and even as we begin in this first point, it is important here to say that confidence can only come, we can only look forward in that way if we have that foundation in place, which is putting our trust in Jesus. For a lot of people here this morning, it's a challenge for us to remember day by day that foundation, that actually we have that, we can look forward because of what Jesus has done.

For other people here this morning, it might be that putting that foundation in place is the first thing of all that needs to be done. Accepting Jesus, his efforts, not ours, trusting in Jesus, the forgiveness he offers made possible at the cross, where he takes our sins on himself.

The righteousness that Jesus gives, that we can't earn his favor, but that we must accept his love. It is only when we grasp that, only as we accept that, what Jesus has done to make us his own, that is when we can have confidence in that future focus as we look forward to our eternal home as citizens of heaven. So that is the first thing Paul emphasizes, confidence in a future focus.

[9 : 53] For those of us that have put our trust in Jesus, to know that confidence. For those still asking questions, to recognize that in Jesus we can have that confidence for all eternity. Confidence because it is Jesus who brings us to our heavenly home. And then the next thing that we're going to look at here that Paul shows us is that as well as confidence, we can also have joy in a future focus. That actually what we're called to look forward to is something that is really, really good.

Joy in a future focus. Paul mentions a couple of things that we're promised when we reach that day, our eternal destination. The first he speaks about is restored bodies. Remember, it's that need for resurrection that is going to be led into this passage this morning. Verse 11, we closed with last week, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Paul knows that actually what we need is a hope that lasts beyond just our lives here on earth. And he builds on that again at the end of this passage. He says, but our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. I think there's often a danger that we so easily forget that Christianity is actually an incredibly physical religion. In a number of religions or worldviews that the physical is actually viewed incredibly lowly. It's almost something that we have to kind of escape from to experience really what it means to be spiritual. And there are people who've tried to kind of teach Christianity that way. But actually that is not what the Bible says.

The great author C.S. Lewis puts it brilliantly. He says, God likes matter. He invented it. The Bible opens with God creating our physical universe and saying it is very good.

And the joy of this future focus is that God promises he will recreate that perfection again. That our bodies will be transformed to be like Jesus's resurrection body, a glorious, a physical restoration. There are a few times when I've been asked as a minister to lead a short service in a care home for elderly people. And you could perhaps maybe spend time in them yourselves. Perhaps you can picture the room. It's usually incredibly hot. And all of the people are there because ultimately that their bodies are starting to give way. For some of them that their minds are starting to give way that they're not going to get better and go home. And it's a challenge to think as you're called in, you know, what is good news for these people? If I was a kind of an atheist or a humanist chaplain, I suppose I would be able to go in and say, well, don't worry because in not too long you'll be dead and then you won't feel anything. Unsurprisingly, I don't think you get that many humanist services at a care home. But how incredible it is to actually be able to go in and say to these people, look, if you are awaiting a savior, the Lord

Jesus Christ, if your trust is in him, he will transform your lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. That is the joy in a future focus.

[13 : 34] And I suppose the stark thing for us to think this morning, as you picture those elderly people in that warm room, is that actually that's where all of us are ultimately heading. I might feel a million miles away. It might feel kind of worryingly close. But we're all heading towards what Shakespeare calls our second childishness, dependence again on others and beyond that, death itself.

And yet incredibly, the gospel says we can look ahead to that, that that brings terror to so many people, that that people would hate to think about. But actually we can look ahead to that, not just with confidence, but with joy. Because there is physical restoration, there is resurrection for God's people, for those who are trusting in Jesus as their savior. And actually that's not just for the elderly, is it? Or not even just for us.

When we get elderly, there are plenty of people of all ages and stages who have plenty of difficulties and issues with their bodies and with their minds. What is the Christian response to that?

Well, this isn't by any means all that the Bible has to say on that point, but it is one of the things it says, which is to say to have that future focus. For those of us who are struggling, when we speak to those who are struggling, we are able to point them forward. Ultimately to have that joy because there is restoration of body and mind. There is resurrection, there is glory to come. And there is joy in this future focus. But also not just physical as well, not just to do with body and mind. Paul also says it in verse 12, not that I have already obtained this, talking about his resurrection, or that I am already perfect. Paul is so aware as well of his physical flaws, also his character flaws, his imperfections, his sin. But again, he looks forward to that day when he will be made perfect. And as he's already said in chapter one, Jesus will bring to completion the work that he has begun.

I'm sure all of us are aware of our flaws, of our failures. It's a kind of a warning sign, in fact, if we're not aware of any of those. And actually, the closer that we get to God, the more and more I think we become aware of those things that are not right in our lives. And we perhaps strive to improve ourselves, to live more and more in God's strength, to live according to the pattern that he lays out. And that's all good. That's part of the Christian life, in becoming more like Christ.

[16 : 21] And yet we're so aware that we'll never actually meet that standard. And here on earth, we never will. But again, Paul says to look forward and to have joy, because that perfection will come.

On that day, when Jesus returns, and he brings complete, holistic, if you want to use that word, mind and body and soul restoration to those who trust in him. That the more we recognize the reality of how things are, in ourselves and in our world, the more I think we long for that, that perfect future. Restored bodies, rescued from sin.

Again, Paul is urging us to have this future focus, to look ahead. That is the mark of growing as a Christian, or a mature Christian, as he says in verse 15. That is their mindset. And that for those who are trusting in Jesus, are looking forward, they can do that, not just with confidence, but with also this incredible joy that the gospel brings. Looking forward is something that should make us joyful people, the joy of a future focus. That's the second thing Paul highlights there. Let's move on then.

And thirdly, we're going to look at what we might call then the effect of a future focus. You perhaps heard the phrase, too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. Perhaps you have that worry that there's a danger for always looking forward. Well, actually then the present, this day, this life even, becomes insignificant or irrelevant, and we won't bother doing anything. And yet for Paul, that's absolutely not the case. As we see here, the effect of a future focus. Have a look at Paul's language in this passage. Because what he doesn't say is, there's great stuff to come, so I'm just going to kind of hang around and kick my heels until I get there. No, he says, because of this, looking forward, I press on. Verse 12, he's straining forward. Verse 13, I press on. Again, verse 14, hold true.

Verse 16, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. This section ends chapter 4, verse 1. These are active words, aren't they? Pressing on, straining forward. The image Paul is painting there is the athlete, is the sprinter who, with their eyes fixed on the finish line, on their destination, on what's to come, gives everything in moving toward that in the present. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Paul's future focus brings about a present effect and a present effort. And that's what he's wanting to encourage in the church. That's been a big part of this letter of Philippians, hasn't it? An energetic church, united and pushing forward. We've kind of titled this series, Striving Together for the Gospel, because that's such a big part of what Paul is encouraging in the Philippian church and for us as we look to that Philippian church. Because again, we've said this is a church that we kind of aspire to. And Paul wants the Philippians to be, he is encouraging them to carry out the purposes that God has for that church. And for them to do that, and in just the same way for us to do that, Paul says we need to keep our eyes on the present, for us to live that out in the present. We need to keep our eyes on the prize. We need to have that future focus, remembering with confidence the joy that is to come has a huge effect on the present.

[20 : 17] I think perhaps a good way to look at that is to see how it works out with some of the big themes of this letter. One thing that Paul has repeatedly spoken about is God's people being able to keep on going, and in fact even having joy in the face of suffering. That's something we've come across quite a lot so far in Philippians, that actually when being a Christian makes life harder, that the church sticks together and moves forward. How is that possible? Well, Paul says that's only possible. He's only been able to keep on doing that by looking forward to what's to come.

This joyful future that means we can push on through hard times because this isn't it. This isn't all we're living for. This isn't our best life now. If all there is is the present, then good advice would be to avoid any kind of suffering like the plague, because why would we ever want that?

But Paul says, no, Christ has made us his own. We have an eternal home that nothing can take away, and that is where our hope is found. And so it's in light of that that we can press on through these challenges in the present. The future makes all the difference going through times of suffering.

Another big theme we've thought about in this letter, again, that what Paul has written about in this letter is humility. The idea of putting others first, putting the needs of others above our own.

Again, how do we do that? Because that's not easy. That doesn't come naturally to us. Well, again, the answer is that it is knowing there is this glorious future where we will be perfected in body, mind, and soul still to come, where we will claim our heavenly citizenship.

[22 : 08] Now, again, if this world is all there is, then it is really, I suppose, a race to get to the top in the time that we have here on earth. And yet when we remain focused on that prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, that is when we're able to serve others here in this life. And knowing that actually we don't need to expend all our energies glorifying ourselves, because God will do that when we reach that day. Instead, we can use our energy to humbly serve one another.

Now, those are just two topics that this letter speaks about, and there's others, but it's clear to see, isn't it, how this principle of living this day in light of that day affects everything. Where are we investing our time? What are we looking for in a house or the area that we live in? What is our attitude to our work? The whole range of decisions that we have to make constantly throughout life are transformed when we see them in light of that day, that day to come. We don't have the chance to work out the implications in all of those areas. But the key is, Christian maturity, as Paul calls it in verse 15, is making those decisions today in light of our eternal home in the future. That is how we press on. That is how we keep on straining forward, keeping our eyes on the prize and the effect of a future focus. And then the last thing that we're going to see in this passage, we've seen the confidence we can have, we've seen the joy we can have, we've seen the effect that it has, this future focus.

Finally, we get this really practical encouragement from Paul about how we can have and maintain this forward-looking way of life, which is that Paul gives us examples of a future focus. That's our last point.

Examples of a future focus. Verse 17, Paul says, Brothers, that word there includes male and female, by the way, Brothers, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

Again, we've probably noticed that throughout this book, Paul has been happy to speak about himself and also to speak about other people, to highlight people like Timothy and Epaphroditus, we saw a couple of weeks ago, as models or examples to follow.

[24 : 44] He's saying, you know, if you want to know what this future focus looks like, if you want to live this out, look at people who are doing it. Paul says, look at my life, look at the life of these other guys. And that's important because Paul goes on then to say, because there are plenty of people who aren't living this way.

Verse 18 and 19, we read there, there are those who are enemies of the cross. There are those whose minds are set on earthly things, the here and the now. And Paul's real and stark warning is that these people too have a future.

Their end is destruction, he says. Paul says there are those who can have no confidence looking forward to the future as their confidence is not in Christ.

They're only looking at the present, only looking to themselves. Paul says it is so important that there are these people all around. Don't follow those people, Paul is saying.

Instead, Paul urges the church to keep their eyes on those, to imitate those, to follow those who are looking ahead, who are straining forward, who have this future focus.

[25 : 54] How do we keep looking to this example? Where do we find this example? Well, I mean, first and foremost, we see it in the Bible. We read God's word in light of eternity. We read the Bible remembering.

It's not just a book of rules or regulations, but it is primarily a story, a true story with a conclusion with that day that the Bible story is heading somewhere.

We see the examples of Paul and others, most notably Jesus himself, who we read elsewhere in the Bible. For the joy set before him endured the cross. We see this future focus throughout the pages of Scripture.

We can also see that example in other Christians as well, through the history of the church. We mentioned last week, I think, Jim Elliott saying, He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.

We began this morning with Martin Luther, who had this day and that day in his calendar. Throughout history, the people who did great things for God, the great figures of the church, whether famous figures or whether unknown figures, but great figures still, were the people with that future focus, not simply living for the here and the now.

[27 : 13] John Piper, an American kind of pastor and author, has got a great series of really short Christian biographies. You can get them free online if you're an e-reader kind of person.

I think we could learn a lot. We could be encouraged a lot. We can be motivated a lot by reading more Christian biography. And I think the more we did that, the more we would see that constant threat.

And there's numerous examples of people who had this future focus that Paul is talking about. People who Paul calls us to keep our eyes on, not just as incredible figures from the past, but as people to imitate.

Paul says, imitate those who walk in these examples. And again, notice here, Paul calls us to join in doing that, to join in imitating. Again, this is another thing in the letter.

This is a whole church thing. We said right at the beginning of Philippians, the big theme here is this idea, we're all in this together. The idea is we should recognize within our own church those who have this future focus.

[28 : 18] We should look to them. And also we should seek to be these examples to other people as well. Ultimately, we grow in this. We mature as Christians. We strengthen that focus.

We press on more as we help each other together. As we spur one another on. As we keep lifting each other's focus from the immediate things which kind of shout so loudly and grab our attention.

That we help lift one another's focus to the eternal things. The good things that God has promised for his people. And there's a challenge really for us to finish with, I suppose, this morning.

Who can we look to as those examples? Again, not in a way that says, I could never do that. I could never be like that. Paul says to look to those who are focused on the future in a way that imitates those as they live this out.

But also, how can we then model that to others? How can we better live a life that others could look to as a demonstration, as an example of straining forward to what lies ahead?

[29 : 25] Of living this day in light of that day. Now, that's not a prideful thing. That's not in any way saying we've got it all sorted. It's like Paul saying, we've not obtained perfection.

We've still got such a long way to go. And yet it is having that future focus with confidence. Because it is Christ who made us his own. It is looking ahead with joy.

Because there is perfect restoration to come. And it is making that effect the present that we live our lives here and now in visible, tangible ways.

In light of, in anticipation of that eternal home. Pressing on to the prize of the upward call of God that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together.