# Planning to Grow in our Pursuit of Christ

## God’s Plan for Our Messiah

By Rob Green

**Bible Text:** Philippians 3:12-14

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As we begin today I would like us to consider the concept of pursuit for a moment the concept of pursuit. It's what a person does when they're passionate about something.

 Last week, Peyton Manning broke the single season passes for a touchdown record but what many people forget is the countless hours that he spent pursuing the ability to throw accurately, to read defenses quickly and to be tough enough to play in the NFL. His career was not solely about god given ability but also about the relentless pursuit of a goal.

 CNN reported last week that Miley Cyrus was one of the most searched for people in 2013. When her role on Hannah Montana and the Disney Show no longer brought ratings she pursued attention in other ways.

 Others have pursued academic degrees just as vehemently as anyone has pursued their athletic or entertainment conquests, we just don't hear about It because as the legendary football coach Bear Bryant, used to say, "No one ever paid to watch someone take a math test." He's right about that.

 Regardless of whether we're talking about an academic goal an athletic one or desire for attention in the entertainment business, each requires a focused pursuit, effort, desire, drive, determination, commitment. The issue this morning is this, should we who have placed our faith and trust in Jesus Christ be passionate in our pursuit of our relationship with him with the same kind of vigor, intensity and effort that other matters are pursued? I hope the answer to that question is absolutely and with that in mind I invite you to turn your bibles to Philippians Chapter Three.

 Philippians Chapter Three, that is on page 155 of the back section of the bible in the chair in front of you page 155 in the back section of the bible in the chair in front of you, Philippians Chapter Three. As you're turning there let me remind you that this year our focus has been on the theme 'Planning to Grow' and by god's grace there were three areas that Pastor Briars laid out for us and he particularly was asking that god would bless and help us grow and one of them was Faith West and then a second one was the Strategic Planning Focus and those two were complete by god's grace.

 The final way which is a way that really never ends is related to our own walk with Christ and that is that we would be passionately pursuing our growing relationship with Jesus Christ. I would like to end this year by turning our attention to that initiative just one more time before the year is out.

 What we're going to be talking about this morning is planning to grow in our pursuits of Christ. Philippians Chapter Three, beginning in verse one. Our focus is going to be on twelve to fourteen but I want to pick up the context so that way we get a running start. Chapter Three verse one.

 Finally my brother, rejoice in the Lord, to right these same things again is no trouble to me and it is the safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers because of the false circumcision for we are the true circumcision who worship in the spirit of god and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh, if anyone has a mind to put confidence in the flesh I far more circumcise the eighth day of the Nation of Israel, The Tribe of Benjamin, the Hebrew of Hebrews as the Law of Pharisee as to Zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to the righteousness when it comes to the law found blameless but whatever things were gained to me, those things that counted as loss with the sake of Christ.

 More than that, I count all things to be lost in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ and be found in him. Not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law but that which is through faith in Christ the righteousness which comes from god on the basis of faith. That I might know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, be conformed to his death in order that I might attain to the resurrection from the dead.

 Now, our key text for this morning, not that I've already obtained it or have already become perfect but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which Christ also, I was laid hold up by Jesus Christ. Behold, I do not regard myself is having laid hold of it yet but one thing I do, forgetting which lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize to the upper call of god in Christ Jesus.

 I would like us to think this morning about three truths from this passage that can help us complete out final initiative for the year. The first truth is simply this, to humbly evaluate your current spiritual condition, to humbly evaluate your current spiritual condition. Reflection is a normal part of this time of year and some of that reflection is required simply because of the tasks that we have to perform. For example, we have to deal with our year end finances. We have to prepare our tax documents, we have to reconcile our bank statements, open our credit card bills and make sure our target purchases don't result in additional things that we weren't planning on.

 We have to calculate our net worth, we need to set financial goals, even goals for our financial advisors, goals for our debts, goals for our college funds and those are just simply facts and those facts just don't lie they force us to reflect. This time of year we are also dealing with family members so it's a time when we have the opportunity to see what the trajectory of our family is. Are we moving in a Christ-like direction or are we moving away from Christ? Is getting together with family a joy or is it full of tension?

 I remember about ten years ago I was asked by just a funeral director if I would speak at a funeral for a man whom I did not know; never met him and I said, "Sure, I'll be happy to do that." I asked for some contact information from his next of kin and so I called this person and the person said to me, "Oh, he died; oh good well he was a mean old man anyway." I thought man, that would make for some awkward Christmas dinners wouldn't it? I wonder how the last ten years had been in that family. How our children respond to the presents that they did or did not receive is a reflection of their hearts. In other words, our time with family forces us to reflect on the trajectory which we're going. We don't even have to plan for that, it forces us into it. Just dealing with our death file, passer-byers has often encourage us to keep and to update; a death file this time of year for the benefit of our loved ones should the lord decide that our stewardship is up and updating that file often causes some reflection.

 More challenging to accomplish is the personal evaluation of our spiritual condition. More challenging is to evaluate personally our own spiritual condition and yet that is exactly what we find in verse twelve where Paul says to this, "Not that I've already obtained it", having already described all of the wonderful benefits that he had already experienced; he says, "not that I've already obtained it or have already become perfect." He automatically understands one thing very important in his life and that is there is always room for growth, there's always room for growth.

 Now listen to my warning here, listen carefully because it's easy for us to admit that we need to grow. It's kind of like how many of you need to eat healthier or exercise more? Right, I'll put my hand up, I've been told that ten thousand times and our doctors in our society, our teachers, I mean everybody is telling us that we have to do that. For me, and I'm sure that for many of you we've been happy to admit such things. Of course, I'm supposed to eat healthier, of course, I'm supposed to exercise more but do I do it? Well, not really.

 In fact, here's one of that little illustrations, I'm from Ohio I think many of you if not all of you know that and one of the traditional candies at Christmas is a Buckeye. A Buckeye, unlike you know, some people who think that any combination of chocolate and peanut butter is a Buckeye, it's not. It has to actually look like the nut, for it to be a Buckeye it has to look like the nut so the chocolate is over the peanut butter but there's still a section of peanut butter that you can see because that's what makes it look like the nut.

 My neighbors know that I happen to love Buckeyes so they bring them over by the metric ton. Should I eat them? I said, "Should I eat them?" Probably not. Will I eat them? Absolutely, in fact, the kids they know they go hiding because they'd sneak them because if dad catches them it's like, "Hey, what are you doing with my Buckeyes?" I mean that's just the traditional candy for an Ohioan.

 Isn't it easy to do that very same kind of thing with a matter like prayer? We're ready, we're happily ready to admit of course, I need to grow in my prayer life, absolutely I do. What am I going to do about it? Nothing. It's easy to do that with bible reading too, isn't it? Here I am I'll happily admit that I need to read the Scriptures more than I do and what am I going to do about it? Nothing. It's easy to do that with serving. To happily admit that you need to serve and then what do you do about it? Nothing.

 You see it's much more challenging and it requires much more humility to not simply say that I need to grow but it's actually to see yourself as needy. To see yourself as needy. For the doctor person the eating right and exercise thing; you know I've noticed this, when a physician tells us that if we don't lose thirty pounds we will be diabetic in six months, there's a level of urgency that automatically shows up then and then all of a sudden people start changing their diet, they start exercising a little more because they don't want the diabetic label, they don't want all the consequences that come with that and so they desire it, there's an urgency to it, they pursue it.

 I'd like to suggest that if we don't see that same level of urgency that we will not pursue Christ and pursue growth. We will be happy to admit that we need some but we won't pursue it unless we see ourselves as needy. I think that's why Paul earlier in the section that I read in versus seven to nine he uses phrases like this, "I want to be found in Christ, I want to know Christ, I want to experience and have fellowship with him in his suffering." He wanted his life permeated more and more and more by the person of Christ and he was writing to a church to let them know that's exactly what he wanted and he wanted them to want that same thing, too. A humble reflection also admits this, that the standard of perfection is Christ, a standard of perfection is Christ.

 All to often the standard that we're content with is to decide that well, we're not as bad as someone else or we're okay in our own judgment, we're at least not as bad as we were five years ago. For instance, that's kind of like this, it's the Christian version of the scales. We've heard about this where an unbeliever will say, "As long as I have more good than I have bad then god's going to accept me I'm going to earn my way into heaven." This is just the believer's version of it. Or we say, "Well, as long as I've taken a step then that's okay." There's no urgency to that and if there is no urgency to that there will not be an urgency to change.

 Let me address another side of that equation for just a minute. Let's say a person accepts the standard, they say, "Okay, I get it." That the standard given here in verse twelve is not that I've already become perfect, okay or I've obtained it, that is perfection in Christ, okay great, I understand I've not done that. However, I don't know that I can and frankly, let's just think about this, that god the father sees us as perfect through the blood of Jesus and we'll be made perfect at his return so why should I worry about it now? Why should I make any effort at it now? Why shouldn't I just live my life the way I want and then god's going to do that same work anyway? I'm just going to sit back and relax.

 Here's an answer to that, because biblical Christianity is not simply a list of do's and don'ts. It's about a personal relationship with Jesus, the king, Jesus the Saviour, Jesus the sacrificial lamb, Jesus the light of the world, Jesus the bread of heaven, Jesus the resurrection, Jesus the conqueror. It matters because we are in a relationship with a person and I'm encouraging you this week especially to humbly evaluate just as the apostle Paul does, your own spiritual condition. Evaluate the quality of that relationship, evaluate ways you need to love him more, to appreciate him more, to know him more.

 A second truth down in this text is to properly put your past in its place. Logically we have humbly evaluated our condition hopefully and identify some ways in which we need to know Christ more to love him more, to be more thankful and one of the challenges is that sometimes the past gets in the way. Pastor Briars wrote a book on this subject it's in the Resource Center but Paul actually brings that concept up in a rather summary fashion in verse thirteen. It says, "I do not regard myself as laying hold of it yet but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead."

 In other words, he says I'm going to forget what lies behind and in this passage he described a number of things about his past both good and bad and he doesn't forget in the sense that he couldn't remember, he doesn't forget in the sense that he oh yeah, thats' right, what did I do yesterday? I forgot. Or who were my parents? Oh yeah that's right I forget who my parents -- that's not what he's talking about. What he's saying here is he's saying I choose something else as more important.

 Of course, I don't forget the story of my life, I don't take an eraser to five years of it, instead I consider something else more important, that's what he means by he forgets something and what he chooses to forget or to value as something as not very important is he refuses to rests on his successes any successes by god's grace. Paul does, in this passage as well as in others, recounts some of his successes. He says, "Here is what by god's grace, I have been able to do." However, it is one thing to say that there have been successes in our life and it's quite another to then use those successes to become lazy, to become proud or to become self-focused.

 As we think about this year, the church, god has given this church an awful lot. He's provided resource after resource in order to make all of these things work. You think about the skills that people have brought to bring about Faith West and how many churches do you know can say, "Oh yeah, we could get that done in a year." Between all of the resource people that were brought into this equation, providing all of the financial resources it's absolutely amazing. As individuals it's kind of easy to say well, you know I served in this fashion or I served in that fashion or I gave in this fashion and so therefore I'm kind of done, I don't need to keep going I don't need to do any more because I have already by god's grace experienced a fair bit of success already.

 in other words, there's a natural tendency of the heart to say I've done enough. It's time for someone else, I've done enough. Here's what Paul says, "I'm not going to remember what I did yesterday because I want to focus on something else that is more important than yesterday. I'm not going to allow the successes of the past to determine the future." On the other hand, he's also refusing to be crippled by his failures and so should we. Paul does not merely look at the benefits he also looks at his failures, too.

 Did you notice verse six what he said? Look at the text again, verse six. "As to zeal a persecutor of the church." I just wonder how hard it was for Paul to write those words. I wonder if he remembered certain faces. I remember if he, I wonder if he remembered hearing the voices of wives or children crying as their husbands were lead away. I wonder if he ever heard the screams of those who were beaten. I wonder if he ever became nauseous as he reflected on the day that he held the coats for the men who killed Steven by stoning no less, a rather vicious way to die.

 The lord doesn't give us an answer to those questions, but Paul's ugly past does not cripple him for the future, that is clear. Paul had an ugly past but he doesn't use that to say, "Well, okay that's it, I'm disqualified, it's never going to happen anymore, therefore I'm done." He forgets what lies behind, he forgets the successes so he doesn't rest on them but he also forgets his failures, he doesn't allow the failure to be a stumbling block to no longer serve or to no longer passionately pursue Christ.

 i wonder how many of us are crippled by our fears and our failures. The failures of the past are still in some ways in the forefronts of our own minds. The reason we don't surrender part of our life to the lord is we're afraid of what god might do with it or the reason we don't take the next step of growth is because we're afraid we might mess someone else up, after all if they learned about our past they wouldn't be interested in hearing any more or the reason we don't step up is we're afraid that our past has completely disqualified us from anything.

 Prayers tonight encourage you. What we see so clearly in the text, Paul is more than happy as he does in verses two through six to recount some of his past. Blessing past, cursing past. And he says, "Here is how I view all of it, I view it all as loss, all the good all the bad and I forget it in order to pursue something better, in order something more important."

 I happened to watch Christmas Carol this week, one of the family traditions I guess and I was reminded of this little illustration. If we're a Christian, we're free from all of the mess of our pasts and so we don't carry a ball and chain anymore. We don't walk around in life with a ball and chain, we're cut free from it, set free from it in order to do something significant. If someone's here this morning who is struggling with their past, maybe it's because you've never truly repented of your sin and trusted in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I would encourage you, there is a way out, you can be freed from that ugly past, you can be freed from the weight of guilt and shame that has been a part of your life.

 Lord of god puts it this way, if you confess with your mouth Jesus as lord, master, king and believe in your heart that god raised him from the dead which means he actually gave his life, he died he was buried and he rose again, then you will have eternal life you will be saved for with the heart a person believes resulting in righteousness and with a mouth he confesses resulting in salvation. I would encourage you do that today, don't let the new year tick by without dealing with this most important issue for you right now.

 I think we all know that Pastor Briars spends the vast majority of his time on point one and then point three is just a one to two minute whack, right? That's not the case with this sermon. Point three is actually the most important one. The third thing we need to do is to passionately then, pursue Christ. The first two were really preparatory work, that is I humbly evaluate and then I properly forget. Now third and most important is I passionately pursue Christ.

 The focus of this text from start to finish is on a passionate pursuit of Jesus. Let me read the text again to highlight some of those emphases. Not that I have already obtained a verses twelve or I've already become perfect but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which I was also laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Rather I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. Verse fourteen; I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of god and Christ Jesus.

 Going back to our athletic imagery; Paul emphasizes the passionate pursuits of the prize. It's not something that he merely hopes will happen, it's not something that he merely dreams about happening, it's not something that he simply talks about happening, it is something that he works toward happening. There's a huge difference there, the effort is exhausting and yet so often here's how people talk. Well, I would like to blank, but let's pick the athletic imagery.

 I want to win the state championship. I want to earn a college scholarship. Great. Now one of the questions is how hard are you willing to pursue it, right? Because you can think about it all you want, you can dream about it all you want, you can talk about it all you want but there's a difference between those who pursue it and those who talk about it. It's the same thing with Christ, too. This is the kind of effort that is going to need to be applied for us to passionately pursue Jesus because in our human heart is naturally inclined to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. That's what our human heart wants to do, give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. That's why we have to humbly evaluate so that the end result of that evaluation is that we're actually needy as opposed to oh, I'm good, I'm just okay, worry need be.

 As long as we're there we won't pursue, that's why I have said before, "I'm working on it." Have you ever heard that before? I'm working on it. Where the it is something that we're supposed to be working on. Right? What are we doing about it? Well, in some cases, nothing. There's a huge difference between a person who says that I'm working on it and a person who takes supposed concrete action to demonstrate that they're actually working on it. That's why just as we would have a few financial goals, why we would have a few family goals, why we would have some work goals; in fact, you can see on the website today are all the staffs, the pastoral staff, professional staff's initiatives on the website, you can see what 2014 is going to be about just by looking at what are the initiatives, so we have some work goals, I'd also encourage you to have some spiritual ones, that have some teeth into them where it's not just words but it's actions; something about Scripture reading.

 Every year we have bible reading plans available in the Welcome Center. Prayer goals, service goals, something that is more than just I'm working on it or yes, I really do need to take a step of growth, something that has some teeth. One of the passages of Scripture that I find haunting is Judge's 210. It says this, "All that generation the generation after Joshua, were gathered to their fathers and there arose another generation after them who did not know the lord nor the work which he had done for Israel."

 The end result of that is everyone does what is right in their own eyes and it's total chaos. In other words, the text highlights for us very much the same thing that Paul was emphasizing; that he wants to know the character of god not just to want things from god, not just to tell god what you want and then god needs to get happy about it, but Paul wanted to know god, he wanted to be known by god, he wanted to know him in his suffering he wanted to experience god. Here is a man who had suffered. By the time he writes Philippians he's been in prison for four to five years, he's going to in just a few years experience his final earthly experience and that is death.

 Paul is not asking for a soft cushy life where he gets everything that he wants, he's asking that his walk with god would be sweeter than before, he's asking that his love for the lord would be greater than it ever has been before. The reason he does this, there's a little phrase in verse twelve, i skipped it till now is because Christ passionately pursued you. Why is it that you would do this? Why would you passionately pursue Christ? The text says, "Because he passionately pursued you." Verse twelve. He says this, "Not that I've obtained it or have already become perfect but I press on so that I may hold of that for which I was also; here's the phrase 'laid hold of by Christ Jesus'."

 While few of us if any would like to think that well god got a good deal when he saved us. I think our tendency is to think very little about it at all. We become ambivalent to the way that Jesus pursued us. We become ambivalent to the fact that he took the initiative, that he paid the price. In fact, in some of my counseling sessions I encourage people to complete the following sentence in at least ten different ways. "I am blank." Fill it in, ten words that describe you, I am blank.

 I'm going to do my own assignment right here and share with you. I am redeemed instead of being on the slave market of sin. I am adopted instead of being an orphan. I'm a friend instead of an enemy. I am reconciled instead of separated. I am free instead of bound. I am prayed for instead of ignored. I'm in his presence instead of being alone. I am loved instead of hated. I am regenerated instead of dead. I am rescued from wrath instead of receiving it and I am an heir instead of a beggar. That's a pretty good list wouldn't you say? If you're a Christian it's a list for you, too.

 Words like redeem, adopted, friend, reconciled, free, prayed for, in the presence of, loved, regenerated, rescued and heir are the words that describe you because Christ passionately pursued you. For the apostle, Paul, that's why he could look past his past. The good and the bad. That's why he could humbly evaluate his current spiritual condition, that's why he could put his past behind him, that's why he could confidently pursue Christ instead of simply add Jesus to his already full life because Christ passionately pursued him.

 I'd like to read one more text of scripture, a rather lengthy one in order to make one more point on this matter. In Luke, Chapter seven to encourage us to develop thankfulness beginning at verse thirty-six the text says this, "One of the pharisees asked him; that is Jesus, to eat with him and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table and behold a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house brought an alabaster flask of ointment and standing behind him at his feet weeping she began to wet his feet with her tears and wipe them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with ointment to where in verse thirty-nine if you turn to it.

 Now when the Pharisee, who had invited him saw this he said to himself, if this man were a prophet he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him for she is a sinner. Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." He said, "Say it teacher." A certain money lender had two debtors, one owed him five hundred dinare and another fifty and when he could not pay he canceled the debt of both. Now which of them would love him more?

 Simon answered, "Well I suppose for the for whom he canceled the larger debt." He said to him, "You've judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" "I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair." "You gave me no kiss but from the time I came in she's not ceased to kiss my feet." "You did not anoint my head with oil but she has anointed my feet with ointment, therefore I tell you her sins, which are many are forgiven for she loved much but he who has forgiven little loves little."

 As the apostle, Paul, understood what it meant that Jesus pursued him, it was the motivation for Christian growth. It wasn't a sense of duty it was a sense of thankfulness and when Paul reflected on his life he was amazed at the awesome work of god and he recognized that he was doing because of what Jesus had done for him. I would encourage you this morning to think why is it you would passionately pursue Christ? Why is it that you would do that? Because he has passionately pursued you.

 Verse fourteen ends by talking about a prize and it provides yet another reason to passionately pursue Christ because this prize is the greatest source of joy and encouragement. To be found in him, to know him, to love him, that is the greatest source of joy and comfort. See Paul understood something that the greatest source of joy and comfort did not come from his circumstances they came from a deep and meaningful walk with god. It came in the lonely moments in prison, it came in the struggle with cold and boredom, it came in the frustrations of dealing with incompetent and greedy people.

 As John Piper's book, "Desiring God" reminds us our greatest joy and comfort needs to be found in Christ. All other life joys are secondary. It doesn't make that irrelevant only in joy for what they are when Christ is first. As 2013 comes to a close, it's time to put the past behind us, it's time instead to humbly evaluate to put our past in the past because something is more important and that is to passionately pursue Jesus.

 Let's stand together for prayer. Father, I'd like to thank you for this text, a text of scripture that reminds us of the significance of what Jesus has done for us. Motivates us to passionately pursue him, and I would ask that you would please help us to be a group of people who decide over this time period right now that there need to be specific steps that we're taking, that the time of talking about it, the time of saying I'm working on it and doing nothing is over, it's time to take specific steps. Would you please grant us the humility that it's going to take in order to help us see this truth differently than the way that we have heard a thousand times that we need to eat right and exercise more In Christ's name, amen.