**The Hill Difficulty**

Text: Philippians 3:13-14

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**Scriptures:** Philippians 3:8-14

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 121, 485, 505, 476, 180

**Series:** The Pilgrim’s Progress (#5)

**Theme:** The Christian life is like a race with knowing Christ in a resurrected body as the goal.

**Proposition:** Live actively in the present with your focus on your future in Christ.

**Introduction**

Have you ever climbed a hill? Hills come in many different sizes and shapes. We call the taller hills ‘mountains’. I have always admired those who have the commitment, courage and self-discipline to climb high steep hills. People like Alex Honnold, a gifted professional rock climber who climbed the almost vertical 1000m face of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park in June 2017. Why, you might ask, has this been described as one of the greatest athletic achievements in all human history? It’s very simple. He climbed without a rope. One false move, one slip and His life would have ended at the bottom of the rock wall. Alex Honnold had a goal, to get to the top of El Capitan in a way that had never been done before – and so far, never since.

In our text from Philippians 3:13-14, The Apostle Paul describes his life in following Christ as being like an athletic race in which he ‘*strains forward to what lies ahead*’. The gospel call to follow Christ is an ‘upward call of God’ and is pictured in John Bunyan’s book The Pilgrim’s Progress as the character Christian comes to a steep hill. Listen to how Bunyan describes this stage of Christian’s journey of faith: “*I beheld, then, that they all went on till they came to the foot of the Hill Difficulty; at the bottom of which was a spring. There were also in the same place two other ways besides that which came straight from the gate; one turned to the left hand, and the other to the right, at the bottom of the hill; but the narrow way lay right up the hill, and the name of the going up the side of the hill is called Difficulty*”.

The word ‘difficulty’ means ‘a thing that is hard to accomplish’. Living for Jesus can at times be ‘a thing that is hard to accomplish’, but the challenges of the Christian life are worth every effort, because the prize is so very valuable. We are going to look at our text this morning under three headings:

1. Climbing without distractions
2. Climbing forwards
3. Climbing for the prize
4. **Climbing without distractions**

A distraction divides your attention and prevents concentration on a task. Distractions in life are nothing new, they just take a different form today than they did in Bible times.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians about how he focuses on living for Jesus. *“one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”.* What does he mean by ‘forgetting what lies behind’? Forgetting likely has the sense here of ‘not paying attention to’. The imagery Paul uses is that of an athletic race where the person in the lead does not look back at the competition behind him or her.

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian met two other men at the bottom of the Hill Difficulty their names were ‘Formalist’ and ‘Hypocrisy’. A ‘formalist’ is a person who strictly follows a set of rules and regulations. The idea here is of someone who does lots of religious things like attending church services, Bible study groups and giving a regular tithe, but does not have faith. A ‘hypocrite’ is a person who acts in ways that go against what he or she claims to believe. The lifestyle of a hypocrite does not match their profession of faith. In The Pilgrim’s Progress, neither Formalist nor Hypocrisy had entered by the narrow gate (representing Christ). They saw no problem in having come in the wrong way, saying to Christian “*If we are in, we are in. You are but in the way, who, as we perceive, came in at the gate; and we are also in the way*”. It would be like someone who is not saved sitting in church and saying to another person who believes in Christ as their Lord and Saviour “we are both in church, both singing songs and listening to the preacher”. What does it matter whether one of us believes and the other does not?

When Christian, Formalist and Hypocrisy came to the bottom of the Hill Difficulty, there were two other ways beside that which came straight from the narrow gate; one was called Danger and the other Destruction. Non-believing Formalist and Hypocrisy took what they thought were the easier ways in order to avoid climbing up the Hill Difficulty. They perished in their way.

Although he spoke briefly with these two, Christian did not allow himself to be distracted, but instead he started climbing. For Alex Honnold, climbing the rock face of El Captain without a rope, any distractions causing a momentary loss of concentration would likely have resulted in his death. There were many things that could have distracted the Apostle Paul as he moved forwards and upwards in his life in Christ. In his past he had been ‘*a persecutor of the church*’ (Phil 3:6). As a Christian, for the sake of his Lord he had suffered much loss (Phil 3:7). Personally he had an ongoing struggle with a temptation or affliction that he called ‘*a thorn in the flesh*’ (2 Cor 12:7). He experienced the daily pressure of his anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor 11:28).

For all of us, to a greater of lesser degree, our lives are affected by difficulties, hinderances, weaknesses and, at times, opposition. A life free from these things is just not possible in this world. So how can we climb up the Hill Difficulty without being distracted? By **not** to paying attention to these things like difficulties, obstacles, weaknesses and opposition in such a way that they distract us from ‘*straining forward to what lies ahead*’. For many people regrets about past failures and faults can be paralysing.

In the Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian’s heavy burden of sin had been removed when He looked to the Cross of Christ. He didn’t need to climb the Hill Difficulty with a heavy pack of regret, shame and guilt, and neither do we, brothers and sisters in the Lord. Christ has paid to lighten our load so that we can follow Him to a glorious future unburdened by sin. We can, and we should, climb without distractions and move forwards, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Climbing forwards**

Nobody completes a running race by going backwards or sideways! There’s only one direction to go: follow the course forwards! The Apostle Paul writes that he was “*straining forward to what lies ahead*”. The Greek word translated “straining forward” expresses the idea of ‘stretching forward’ or ‘reaching for’. It was used in the ancient world of athletes. You may know that there is a recommended running posture of leaning forward slightly. Christian, in the Pilgrim’s Progress changed from running to clambering up on his hands and knees as the Hill Difficulty became steeper.

As He came to the top of the hill, he saw two men running down. Their names were ‘Timorous’ and ‘Mistrust’. Timorous means ‘suffering from nervousness or a lack of confidence’. Mistrust means ‘suspicious of, or having no confidence in’. They had seen a couple of lions by the way and did not dare go on. Timorous explained ‘*the further we go, the more danger we meet with; therefore we turned, and are going back again*’.

You may think that climbing, running or living the Christian life is mostly about making a huge effort. The words in our text “straining forward” may suggest this to you, but in fact whether you are climbing, running or living the Christian life, your progress is mainly determined by your attitude. ‘straining forward’ is a mindset as Paul explains in verses 15-16: **“***Let those of us who are mature,* ***think this way*** *and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained” (Phil 3:15-16).*

What then is this attitude? It is the mindset of Christ Himself“*Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Heb 12:2). Jesus Christ in His perfect life on this earth, ‘strained forward to what lied ahead for Him’. We could say that He kept the ‘big picture in mind’. He looked beyond the great difficulty of the cross to the joy of fulfilling His saving purpose in both His life and death.

For Christ, His Hill Difficulty was steeper and higher than anything you or I will ever climb. When we climb upwards in the Christian life, we do so in His strength. In the garden of Gethsemane, when He was not yet at the end of His ‘climb’ the difficulty was extreme. He was ‘greatly distressed and troubled’ saying to His disciples “*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch*” (Mark 14:34). Instead of remaining awake, the disciples slept – just as Christian did in the Pilgrim’s Progress when he was part way up the Hill Difficulty.

By God’s grace, someone came to this sleeping Pilgrim and quoted from Proverbs 6:6: “*Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise*”. If you’ve ever seen ants, they are usually busy moving quickly! Once he was awake again, ‘*Christian suddenly started up, and sped him on his way and went apace till he came to the top of the hill*’. Christian moved forward and upward towards his goal, the Celestial City – representing the New Jerusalem as described in the Book of Revelation.

Have you ever fallen asleep in church or stopped concentrating? I get a clear view of the congregation from the front here – if you can see me then I can see you! You might be surprised at what I have seen over the years whilst I have been preaching: people nodding off, chatting to those next to them and more! Once a young couple in the back row of a church were focusing their attention on each other. Their heads got closer and closer together until…. they kissed each other. They were clearly not focused on what was being said from the pulpit. Perhaps you’ve heard the old joke about a man falls asleep during the sermon. The preacher spies him, and addresses his neighbour in the pew. “Can you reach over and wake him up?” The punch line follows: “Preacher, you put him to sleep. You wake him up!”. There is also a warning in Scripture in Acts 20:9 “*And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead”*.

Young people especially, I would like to encourage you to be alert when you are in church worship services or other meetings. Listen carefully to what is said. As a church we desire that you would all ‘*strain forward to what lies ahead*’ as you live for Jesus a life that is true, striving to please him in all that you do, yielding allegiance, glad-hearted and free. Why? Because this is the pathway of blessing for you and for us all. It is a narrow upward path at the end of which is a prize of great value, which brings us to our third point

1. **Climbing for the prize**

At the time when Paul wrote to the Philippian church, runners competing in athletic games could gain fame and fortune if they won. Alex Honnold has become a celebrity through the movie ‘Free Solo’ which was made of his ascent of El Capitan. However, whatever prizes we may gain in this life; one day we will leave them behind. Nobody takes anything with them when they die. Someone has said ‘Hearses – the vehicles that carry coffins - don’t pull trailers’.

The prize that the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians about in our text is only fully obtained afterwe die. It is given to all who follow Jesus Christ by faith because He climbed the ultimate Hill Difficulty – going all the way to the cross to die for people like us. He went to the cross always living a life where he ‘*forgot what was behind him and stained forward to what was ahead*’. He ‘forgot’ that is ‘did not pay attention to’ what he had left behind. The Apostle Paul explains this to the Philippians in chapter 2:5-7 “*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*”.

Jesus died and was buried, but He didn’t remain dead. He was raised to life, never to die again. He is alive today. Christ Himself is the prize that Paul writes about in our text. *“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”.* Ultimately, the prize is knowing Christ face to face (1 Cor 13:12) in the New Heavens and New Earth in a resurrected body. There the fullness of the blessings will be experienced by all those who follow the pathway of faith in Jesus who is “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6). The gift of God through Christ is everlasting life. An ongoing experiencing of perfect wisdom, joy, holiness, peace, and friendship forever. All this and more enjoyed to the glory of God in a marvellously restored universe, and in the company of Christ and of all the saints. This is the goal toward which Paul was climbing upward, pressing on and straining forward.

Heidelberg Catechism LD17 expresses the prize that comes to all who trust in Christ in these words, firstly asking the question “How does Christ’s resurrection benefit us?”

1. First, by his resurrection he has overcome death, so that he might make us share in the righteousness he won for us by his death
2. Second, by his power we too are already now resurrected to new life
3. Third, Christ’s resurrection is a guarantee of our glorious resurrection.

Notice that in Christ, we, brothers and sisters, are ‘already resurrected to new life’. Whilst the fullness of the prize comes at the end of the climb, we receive many gifts from our Lord on the journey. We will see, God willing, next week in The Pilgrim’s Progress that having climbed the Hill Difficulty, Christian comes to the Palace Beautiful. This is a place of rest, refreshment and relief. There he will meet Watchful, Discretion, Piety, Prudence, and Charity. As we come together as a congregation each week, the Lord provides all who will look to Him with rest, refreshment and relief on our journey as we progress as pilgrims.

Young people, listen again to some wise advice from the book of Proverbs (3:5-6): “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths*”. The ‘straight path’ of following Christ does involve difficulty. At times it is a steep climb where it is easy to lose your footing. When we do slip, we can get back on track by turning to Christ again in repentance and faith and trusting Him afresh. Have you done this?

Be encouraged this day because Christ has climbed the Hill Difficulty to the cross for us, brothers and sisters. As you follow Him, forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead, press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

AMEN.