In the passage that we just read, Paul addressed a question that was commonly asked among many early Christians, *“how does one acquire faith? And how does one keep up with our relationship with God?”* Paul was writing this personal letter to a beloved community in the city of Philippi. Among all the churches in the region, Paul loved the Philippians the most. Over the years, he had developed this personal relationship with the Philippians and he remembered them by keeping them in his constant prayers, even while he was imprisoned. There was a lot of love and joy expressed throughout his letter, even though he was being held in captivity, depriving of his freedom, and his ability to proclaim and to share the gospel with others.

As a matter of fact, the uncertainty about his future facing his imminent threat of death made him even more exuberant or zealous, and a sense of urgency in sharing his message of hope and salvation to others. Paul didn’t see his present hardships as a deterrence of his faith, in fact, it was the complete opposite. He was able to make the most of unfortune situation and turn into opportunities to witness for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians was a letter of JOY. The word “Joy” or “Rejoice” was mentioned 16 times in his short letter of only 4 chapters, culminating in his final exhortation in 4:4, ***“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”***

When it comes to the prison, Paul knew it well, because he used to be on the other side of the law. He was the prosecutor who would hunt down the Christians, put them in jails, or even sentenced them to death. So now, HE’s the one being imprisoned himself for speaking on behalf and defending the gospel and his faith in Christ. **Talk about a dramatic life transformation** – a total reversal and a complete turnaround. Who would’ve thought that a former prosecutor would now be imprisoned for his witness and testimony of his faith in Christ? Paul was no longer the person whom he once was. He was a new person, a new creation. This only goes to show that transformation CAN happen even for someone who may be the most notorious, hated, or stubborn. A new beginning IS possible, if one is willing to confess genuinely by making the effort.

In our text this morning, Paul began by making a connection with his fellow believers in Christ. He claimed his lineage as a devout Jew, a decedent of the tribe of Benjamin. At first glance, it looks as if Paul was boasting about his personal achievements, but he was actually doing the opposite. Paul had quite an impressive credentials: upbringing, citizenship, family heritage and inheritance. As impressive his resume may look, Paul was saying that he would literally shred it into pieces and throw it into the garbage. None of those mattered anymore. They became all superfluous when it comes to one’s relationship with Christ.

**One’s credentials, pedigrees, accomplishments, reputation, and status cannot earn one’s salvation into heaven, but instead it solely depends upon God’s grace and one’s faithful commitment and response to such grace.**

Many biblical scholars would agree that by no means, Paul was attempting to show-off his credentials with his series of “boasting” and claims as a sign of arrogance or personal pride. He claimed his dual status as a Jew and a Roman citizen towards his advantage in reaching others for Christ. As he wrote in his other letters to the early church in Corinth, *“to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law so that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law so that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.* ***I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some****. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Paul felt honored to be in a position of where he could influence others by making the connection with his potential converts and believers of the gospel. **As a pragmatic theologian, Paul did not fix his eyes upon the heavenly prize of the future, but upon his “heavenly calling in Christ Jesus” at the present.** His ulterior motivation was to lead as many non-believers into faith in Christ, for the sake of God’s kingdom. Simple as that! And he was willing to risk it all, even with his own life.

As one theologian summed up Paul’s overall mission this way, William Greenway wrote, *“while Christians may believe in and celebrate heaven, the goal of Christian spirituality is never heaven. The goal of Christian spirituality is one’s own imitation/realization of the spirit of Christ, a spirit of compassion and sympathy, a spirit which leads to a life that remains faithful to loving action for others, even unto death.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Throughout this “love” letter to the Philippians, Paul demonstrated that regardless of how impressive one’s credentials, accomplishments or reputation may be, none of that matter. **Salvation only comes through God’s reconciling grace and one’s responding faith in Christ.**

Furthermore, Paul regarded all the credentials listed on his resume as “rubbish”, in order that he may gain Christ. Actually in the Greek translation, the word that Paul described as “rubbish” was closer to the meaning of “undesired human waste”. Paul was willing to surrender ALL that he had worked so hard for, all that defined who he was and made him who he had become, for the sake of this newfound relationship with Christ. This new relationship brought new meaning and purpose for him, as his strived to be an “ambassador” for Christ for all those who needed to hear the gospel the most…the poor, the sick, the orphans and widows and those who are marginalized, voiceless, and powerless.

A couple of weeks ago, I was talking to one of my neighbors and she asked me if I knew anyone or Christians who live in the Toronto area. Well, of course I said yes. And I asked her why? She told me that she was concern about the spiritual well-being of her cousin, who has been declining in health but he has not yet committed his faith to Christ. On the other hand, he is not rejecting God either. She asked me if I could connect her with someone from a church who might possible accompany her and pray with her, when she goes to visit her cousin in Toronto in a couple of weeks.

As she explained more about her cousin’s backgrounds and how stubborn he has been into accepting Christ as his Lord and Savior, I felt sympathetic to help my neighbor out, not only to pray for her and her cousin but to help her make some connection with a Christian community. I happen to know someone in a church that turns out to be about 20 minutes away.

What’s interesting was that as I was drafting this email to this pastor friend up in Toronto, I found myself making a series of connecting points when I introduced myself and my friend’s situation with that pastor, kind of like what Paul was doing when he shared his credentials and personal backgrounds that validate his mission and purpose. Like Paul, it was not my attempt to boast my credentials but to simply make a personal connection with someone through our common faith and mission in Christ. We are all co-workers in God’s mission here on earth as we honor God’s calling in our lives. We have confidence that God will mobilize God’s servant to reach out to those who are in need of hearing the gospel, but most importantly we pray that my friend’s cousin may respond to God’s grace accordingly.

Come to think of it, we all have our own faith journey to navigate through – a journey that Christ has pledged to walk alongside us. God has given us the gift of relationship….relationship not only with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but also our relationship with one another, strangers and friends, young and old, both near and far. Through his saving grace, Christ has bonded us all together and has made us one of his own.

Furthermore, when it comes to our faith, it shall not be a personalized one, but instead a personal one. What I mean by that is that, **our faith shall not be defined by what WE are looking for or what WE are getting out of it, but instead, how WE may respond to God in our faith both individually and collectively.** In other word, our faith journey is meant to be lived out in communion and in community with one another and NOT to be individualized.

By the virtue of our faith through baptism, each of us has been called to participate in God’s mission in this world. We’ve been equipped to run this race across the finish line, as we press on toward the goal. **We are all in this together!** As God continues to challenge us to sing a new song each day…and to see what God may have installed for us for our future, we “press on toward the goal” in running our course of life together. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, *“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

**This is ultimately Christ’s ministry and not ours. We may take “ownership” or claim our affiliation or belonging to the Body, but we certainly do NOT own it or rule over it!** This captures the essence of what Paul was trying to remind us today, when he claimed that “***for his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ…because Christ has made me his own*.”[[4]](#footnote-4)  *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.[[5]](#footnote-5)***

During this Lenten season, we are invited to examine our own lives by tossing aside any credentials and qualifications that differentiate and elevate us above others. **Our first and foremost qualification or identity is that we are a child of God. Nothing else matters. We shall claim Christ as our own because He has first claimed us as one of His own, as fellow sisters and brothers, colleagues and cohorts in ministry.** Let us press on in finishing his race by “making it our own” as we continue to journey our way from the wilderness to the cross.

Later on, as we approach God’s table of gratitude and lavished grace, let us come with a renewing confidence in faith that can only be found in Christ, who gave his ultimate sacrifice and redeemed us of our sins. Christ has run his race and crossed his finish line, now it is up to us to finish our race and to cross our finish line. We live today because of the One who died, has risen, and is giving us new life once again.

***Forget what lies behind and [let us] strain forward to what lies ahead. We press on….we press on toward the goal of reaching that heavenly prize which God has prepared for us.[[6]](#footnote-6)* We press on!**

1. *1 Corinthians 9:20-23* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Greenway, William *Connections, Year C, Volume 2,* p.102 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Isaiah 43:18-19* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Philippians 3:8 and 12* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Philippians 1:21* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Philippians 3:13-14* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)