

LAUGH AGAIN: Experience Outrageous Joy

STUDY NINE

Hanging Tough Together . . . and Loving It

Philippians 3:12–16

The Christian life is not about singing goofy songs, praying dreamy prayers, or living in some sort of ethereal alternate reality where everything turns out rosy. None of that. The Christian life requires perseverance, which means hanging tough against all odds. It is living with the sword over your head.

—Charles R. Swindoll

WE all need enduring determination in order to persevere through the most difficult game of all—the game of life, especially the Christian life that too many people falsely believe is a bed of roses. They quickly discover that living for Christ on earth requires spiritual toughness. That includes persistence, determination, and what Chuck Swindoll refers to as the ability to “hang tough, regardless.” We will see spiritual toughness on display in the apostle Paul during our continuing study of Philippians 3.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Since none of us can conjure this spiritual toughness by our own willpower or find it by our own ingenuity, we depend upon God to give it to us—day by day, hour by hour. Take a moment to ask Jesus Christ, who has made you His own, to fortify you through this study. Pray that you would receive a clearer vision of the upward call of God that you may stand firm in the new life He has given you.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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Philippians 3:12–16



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

At first glance, reading Paul’s testimony might make you think he achieved a certain level of unattainable spiritual perfection, which might be discouraging, especially for new Christians just beginning their walk with God. But a closer examination of Paul’s words in Philippians 3:12–16 reveals a more realistic and uplifting scenario. Take a few minutes to review the passage and make some notes about what stands out as significant.



Observation: Paul’s Process for Pursuing Perfection—Philippians 3:12–14

According to the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, we observe the text by looking for words or sections that are compared, contrasted, emphasized, repeated, or related. We look for central ideas. Paul continued focusing on gaining a deeper experience of Christ and emphasized the fact that he had not yet fully arrived at that noble goal:

I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. (Philippians 3:12)

Notice that Paul set up a contrast between two ideas by using the word *but*. What two ideas was Paul contrasting according to verse 12?



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Paul drew from the context of the previous verses to develop his next few points. How is verse 12 linked to verses 10 and 11 from the last study?

Based on verses 13–14, what was Paul’s new focus in life?

What metaphor did Paul employ to explain the process of reaching spiritual perfection?



Interpretation: Racing toward Maturity in Christ—Philippians 3:13–16

Understanding metaphors in Scripture helps us unlock the biblical writer’s meaning. Interpretation involves a process that helps answer the question, *What does the text mean?* Metaphors often provide important clues to meaning. Paul concluded this section on what it means to experience spiritual maturity by likening the achievement of spiritual maturity to finishing a race.

No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

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. But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.
(Philippians 3:13–16)



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Paul emphasized the importance of leaving the past and focusing on the future. How does this transition help the believer gain spiritual progress?

How can focusing on the past impede spiritual progress both for individuals and for churches?

Living in the past, by the way, can be the death knell over a church. A church can live in the days of past glory. Or a Christian organization can live in the days when “we were a great place.” But I say you’re headed for trouble when that is your attitude. The apostle says, “Forget what lies behind.”
—Chuck Swindoll

Paul likened the process of gaining spiritual maturity or “perfection” (Philippians 3:12) to running a race and receiving a prize.

What do you think he meant by “press on” to reach the end of the race?

What emotions come to your mind when you think of someone pressing on to finish a race?



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How would training for and completing a marathon, for instance, be likened to the process Paul described for realizing spiritual maturity?

New Testament commentaries are helpful resources for shedding light on metaphors and images the biblical writers employed. Take a few minutes to consult either a *commentary on Philippians* or a Bible dictionary to discover the significance of Paul's racing metaphor, and record what you learn below.

Though Paul used his personal story to emphasize his point, there are numerous examples in the Scriptures that offer a vivid illustration of others who chose to hang tough and strengthen their faith.



Correlation: Immoveable in the Lord's Work

Correlation compares passages of Scripture to help interpret the passage in view. Paul's experience of hangin' tough served him to the end. But there are other examples in Scripture that the journey toward spiritual maturity is often uphill and through storms.

Here are a few examples:

- Samson facing strong temptation
- Jonah running from God's clear command
- Daniel facing the lions
- John Mark losing his courage
- Peter finding strength in colossal failure



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Consider Paul's strong exhortation in his letter to the Corinthians:

So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

How do Paul's words to the Corinthian church support his exhortation to the Philippians to hang tough in the process of reaching spiritual maturity?



Application: Making Progress, Day by Day

Application moves us from maintaining a mere intellectual understanding of a passage to allowing truth to penetrate our hearts. Throughout Chuck's message on this compelling passage, he offered several pointed applications to help fix these truths deep within our lives. Pick one of these principles to live by this week:

1. *The plan for spiritual maturity is progress, not perfection.* God desires that we follow Him and experience a journey of faith toward realizing spiritual maturity in Christ.
2. *The past is over, so forget it.* There are few things more debilitating in the Christian life than living in the past. Paul's aim was to look "forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13).
3. *The future holds out hope, so reach for it.* There is so much more to be gained by reaching for the future with Christ than living in the past without Him.
4. *The secret is a determined attitude, so maintain it.* Paul repeatedly emphasized the fact that he had not yet arrived at spiritual maturity but that he was committed to the process.
5. *The need is to keep a high standard . . . together.* God did not design the Christian life to be journeyed alone. And the process of gaining Christ is a process that requires the accountability and fellowship of God's people, who are mutually committed to each individual's spiritual growth.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for encouraging me through Your Word to hang tough in my walk with Christ . . . and to resist going it alone. Thank You for providing people in my life who love me, who are willing to challenge me when I'm failing, and who encourage me when I'm down. How thankful I am today for each one who journeys with me. In Jesus' name, amen.



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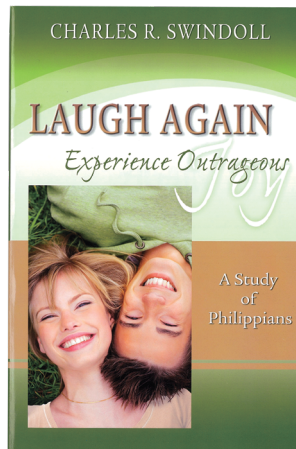
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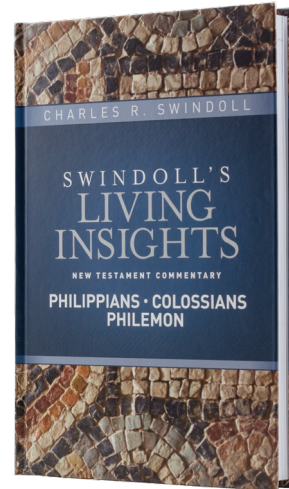
Tools for Digging Deeper



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For the 2019 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Mark Tobey in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Pastoral Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.

