

Pressing toward the Mark

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It is not so much about what we are going through in life but what we are becoming.

As I read the book of Acts and Paul's epistles, I am amazed at how Paul was driven by love and gratitude in serving, teaching, and testifying of Jesus Christ. How can such a person serve with such love and gratitude, especially considering his great sufferings? What motivated Paul to serve? "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."¹

To press toward the mark is to faithfully continue on the "strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life"² with our Savior and our Father in Heaven. Paul viewed his sufferings as "not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."³ Paul's letter to the Philippians, which he wrote when he was bound in prison, is a letter of overwhelming joy and rejoicing and encouragement to all of us, particularly in this difficult time of uncertainty. We all need to take courage from Paul: "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ."⁴

While we look at Paul's service, we are inspired and uplifted by our own "Pauls" in our day, who also serve, teach, and testify with love and gratitude amidst the challenges they face in their lives and in the lives of their loved ones. An experience I had nine years ago helped me to realize the importance of pressing toward the mark.

In 2012, as I walked for the first time into the general conference leadership meeting, I could not help feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. In my mind there was a voice persistently repeating, "You do not belong here! A serious mistake had been made!" Just as I was walking trying to find a place to sit, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland spotted me. He came to me and said, "Edward, it is good to see you here," and he tenderly patted my face. I felt like a baby! His love and embrace warmed me up and helped me to feel the spirit of belonging, the spirit of brotherhood. On the following day, I observed Elder Holland doing the same thing he had done to me on the previous day, warmly patting then-Elder Dallin H. Oaks's face, who is his senior!

At that moment I felt the Lord's love through these men we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. Elder Holland, through his kind, natural actions, helped me to overcome my self-centeredness and my feelings of inadequacy. He helped me to

focus on the sacred and joyful work to which I had been called—to bring souls to Christ. He, like Paul of old, pointed me to press toward the mark.

Interestingly, Paul is exhorting us to press forward while calling us to forget that which is behind—our past fears, our past focus, our past failures, and our past sadness. He is inviting us, just like our dear prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, to “a newer, holier approach.”⁵ The Savior’s promise is real: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”⁶

In my first general conference address, I shared an experience of my mother teaching me to work in our field. “Never look back,” she said. “Look ahead at what we still have to do.”⁷

Toward the end of her life, while Mother battled cancer, she lived with Naume and me. One night I heard her sobbing in her bedroom. Her pain was intense, even after taking her last daily dose of morphine only two hours earlier.

I entered her room and sobbed with her. I prayed aloud for her to receive instant relief from her pain. And then she did the same thing she had done in the field years ago: she stopped and taught me a lesson. I will never forget her face at that moment: frail, stricken, and full of pain, gazing with pity on her sorrowing son. She smiled through her tears, looked directly into my eyes, and said, “It is not up to you or anyone else, but it is up to God whether this pain will go away or not.”

I sat up quietly. She too sat quietly. The scene remains vivid in my mind. That night, through my mother, the Lord taught me a lesson that will stay with me forever. As my mother expressed her acceptance of God’s will, I remembered the reason Jesus Christ suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross at Golgotha. He said: “Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is [my] gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me.”⁸

I reflect on our dear prophet President Nelson’s prophetic questions to us in the last general conference. President Nelson asked: “Are *you* willing to let God prevail in your life? Are *you* willing to let God be the most important influence in your life? ... Will you allow His voice to take ... precedence over every other ambition? Are you *willing* to have your will swallowed up in His?”⁹ My mother would have responded with an emotional but firm “yes,” and other faithful members of the Church across the globe would also respond with an emotional but firm “yes.” President Nelson, thank you for inspiring and uplifting us with these prophetic questions.

Recently, I had a conversation in Pretoria, South Africa, with a bishop who buried his wife and his adult daughter on the same day. Their lives were claimed by this coronavirus pandemic. I asked how he was doing. Bishop Teddy Thabethe’s response strengthened my resolve to follow the words and counsel from the Lord’s prophets, seers, and revelators. Bishop Thabethe responded that there is always hope and comfort in knowing that the Savior has taken upon Himself the pains of His people that He may know how to succor us.¹⁰ With deep faith he testified, “I

am grateful for the plan of salvation, the plan of happiness.” He then asked me a question: “Is this not what our prophet was trying to teach us this last conference?”

While the challenges of mortality will come to all of us in one way or another, let us focus on the goal of our “press[ing] toward the mark,” which is “the prize of the high calling of God.”¹¹

My humble invitation to all of us is to never give up! We are called to “lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.”¹²

It is not so much about what we are going through in life but what we are becoming. There is joy in pressing toward the mark. I testify that He who overcame all will help us as we look up to Him. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.