ONWARD AND UPWARD

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The text for our sermon this morning is the Epistle lesson for this day written in the 3rd chapter of Philippians and beginning in the 4th verse. (Philippians 3:4-14)

I have a question for you this morning/evening. And my question is "do you have a main goal for your life? Is there something you are hoping to accomplish? Some goal that you want to reach?"

Year ago there was an entertainer on television named Art Linkletter. Art Linkletter was on tv quite a few years ago and so you might have to be a little older to remember him. One of Linkletter's several shows was one called, "Kids Say the Craziest Things." Actually, I have changed the title just slightly in case any of you remember it and were wondering! Anyway, one of the things which Linkletter did was ask children who were about preschool to 3rd grade age different questions. And Linkletter asked the kids questions like what they might do if mom and dad were not around or what their favorite animal was or how old they would like to be. For example, one 5-year-old said she wished that she could be 18 so that she could go on dates and kiss boys. The kids Art Linkletter interviewed often gave crazy answers and most of the time they did it without realizing it. One question which was a favorite of Art Linkletter's was to ask children what they wanted to be when they grew up. It was kind of a "what is the goal of your life" kind of question. And kids would have answers. One boy wanted to be a doctor when he grew up. And Art asked him if he would be able to help him if he had a stomach ache. "Sure," the boy said, "I would pat you on the back until you burped." Another little girl wanted to be a stewardess when she got big. Art asked her if she would know what to do if her plane got in trouble. And she did. She said she would pass out parachutes to everyone but if she ran out of parachutes, she would quickly sew some sheets together to make more parachutes and she would also give the people with sheets pillows so they could have softer landings. One young man's goal in life was to become a missionary when he grew up but he wasn't sure if that was going to work out because then he would have to give up playing the slot machines. Art told him to maybe check with the pastor about that.

As Art Linkletter discovered, kids would sometimes say the craziest things when he asked them what was the goal of their life. But, crazy or not, what would you say as an answer to that question? What do you want to be when you grow up? Or what is the ultimate, main goal of your life? And, most importantly, do you have one?

And I mention goals because the Apostle Paul in our text for today mentions a goal which he has. Paul writes that HE PRESSES ON TOWARD THE GOAL OF THE PRIZE OF THE UPWARD CALL OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS. And what does that mean? What is THE PRIZE OF THE UPWARD CALL OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS? And the simple answer to that question is that Paul's goal is to get to heaven.

Paul wants to go onward through life and then receive the prize of going upward to heaven. The upward call of God is God's call of salvation. It is God's call to us by the Holy Spirit to live a life of repentance of our sins and faith in Christ to forgive those sins by His death on the cross. And finally, when we die, our goal is to go upward to heaven. Very simply, Paul's main goal for his life is to get to heaven. He may have other goals along the way like running a 5K because Paul seems to have been an athlete, or maybe finishing another missionary journey like the several he was on. But for Paul what he most of all wanted to accomplish was to escape the vale of tears on earth with all of its heartaches and troubles and to someday live with Christ his Savior in the glories and joys of heaven. Onward through life and upward to heaven was Paul's goal.

And so, we might ask ourselves, "What about us?" If we think about goals for our life is getting to heaven one of our goals? It is one of yours? If someone asks you about your goals is going to heaven on that list. When we first think about goals, all kinds of things can come to mind. Some of you may have a goal of making that last mortgage payment or taking a 2nd honeymoon to some exotic faraway place. Others may be dreaming of a job promotion or waiting for that 1st grandchild. Those of you who are younger might have the goal of becoming a millionaire by the time you are 30 or marrying the love of your life and becoming parents of 3 perfect children.

I work at Hilton Coliseum and I was ushering a couple of years ago at graduation. If you are familiar with graduation, you know some of the students have a chance to fill out a card before the ceremony and answer a question and then that question will be read-off as they are walking across the stage getting their diploma. One of the questions has been "what is your goal or plans for after graduation?" And the one guy wrote on his card, I PLAN TO GO HOME AND CRASH IN MY PARENTS BASEMENT AND EAT PIZZA AND PLAY VIDEO GAMES. which proves it isn't only kids who say the craziest things. Cyclone graduates will also do that!

When we think about goals, lots of things might be on a goal list. But the question we need to think about is getting to heaven on that list. Do you think about that? And if you don't, you should! We all need to think about getting to heaven. And the reason why is because someday we all are going to die. And when we do take our last breath in this world, we will take our next breath in either one of two places. According to the Bible, our next breath after this life will either be in heaven or it will be in hell.

The Bible doesn't talk about any other options. And the other reality is that we can't escape dying. Death is a consequence of sin and the Bible says in places like Ezekiel 18 THAT THE SOUL WHO SINS IS THE ONE WHO WILL DIE (Ezekiel 18:20) And we all have souls and all of our souls sin. The Bible says this too in Romans chapter 3. FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD (Romans 3:23) The reality is that because we are sinners none of us can escape dying. When we are going to die we probably won't know but it will happen. Death can come when we are older and more expecting it or when we are dealing with a disease and the prognosis is not good. Death can come anytime also by accidents happening or people doing evil deeds. And by the way, being young and in college does not make you safe from dying either. The band member at Iowa who died a couple weeks ago at the football game is a sad reminder of that.

The fact that we all are going to die and that we could pass away at any time, means that we need to be ready at any time. And if our goal is to end up in heaven, then we need to be ready to go there instead of to the other place. And so how can that happen? How can we make sure that we are like Paul and we REACH THE GOAL OF THE PRIZE OF THE UPWARD CALL OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS?

And the answer is we need to trust in Christ! Paul's language here in Philippians gets a little hard to understand but in verse 9 what Paul says is we shouldn't depend on ourselves keeping the law and doing good to get us into heaven but instead we should trust in the righteousness which we get from having our faith in Christ to save us. Paul is reminding us we get to heaven by what Christ did for us and not by what we do ourselves. And it is not natural to think this way. And Dolly Parton might be a good example for us to look at. Dolly Parton passed away a little over a month ago (August 25, 2026) and the news has been filled with stories of all the good deeds which Dolly did in her 80 years here on earth. Channel 5 news in Nashville had this headline for one of their stories. The headline said... "Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has gifted more than 332 million books to children around the world." A couple of Dolly's books are pictured on the screen. Dolly's Imagination Library works with local libraries and children in this program are sent one free book every month in the mail from birth to 5 years old when children begin kindergarten. 332 million is lots of kids getting lots of books in 5 countries around the world. And the Imagination Library is just one of tons of charity projects which Dolly supported with millions and gazillions of dollars. When Dolly died, most all the talk that was religious was about all this good stuff which Dolly had done and now she was with Jesus in heaven. The suggestion was that as Dolly forged onward in life doing good that meant when she died she automatically won THE PRIZE OF BEING CALLED BY GOD UPWARD TO HEAVEN.

The problem with people saying this though is that the Bible doesn't say this. No place does the Bible say that someone giving 332 million books like Buffalo Fluffalo to children will make up for whatever sins that that person did in their life. And I am not saying that Dolly Parton didn't make it to heaven but what we can all know is that if she did get to heaven, it was not because of her good deeds. It was because she believed in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, and this is the point which Paul makes also. Paul basically says here in verse 4 that if anyone should have confidence that they are going to heaven because of who they are or what they have done it should be him.

And Paul lists his accomplishments here. First Paul says, HE WAS CIRCUMCISED ON THE 8TH DAY. This was one of God's requirements since the days of Abraham that all good Jews were to be circumcised as a way of keeping God's law. And Paul did this. Paul also listed that he WAS PART OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL. Paul was an authentic Jew who traced his heritage back to Abraham. Paul wasn't a convert to Judaism. He was born into it. It was in his blood. He was one of the chosen people of God.

And Paul goes on then to list some more reasons why people think he for sure will get into heaven. And one of those reasons is that not only is he Jewish and part of the people of Israel but he is also part of the tribe of Benjamin. When the 12 tribes of Israel broke apart after the days of Solomon, 10 tribes went their own way but Judah and Benjamin stayed together. Judah has always been special because Jesus was descended from the line of Judah. Benjamin was special though because he was the youngest son of Jacob and he was the second son born after Joseph to Jacob's favorite wife Rachel and from the tribe of Benjamin came Israel's 1st king Saul which was Paul's name before he became Paul. By being from the tribe of Benjamin, Paul had a pedigree which made him a special Jew among the special Jews.

And Paul goes on like this keeping on listing reasons why if he died other people might think he had the credentials to get into heaven. Paul lists he was A HEBREW AMONG HEBREWS meaning he followed the Jewish customs which many Jews didn't. Paul lists he was a Pharisee meaning he was part of that exclusive group of church leaders who tried to follow all the laws of Moses and the church perfectly. Paul also credits his zeal for persecuting the early Christian church as something to his credit because it showed his passion for serving God. And finally Paul says HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS IN KEEPING THE LAW OF GOD WAS BLAMELESS.

Paul was very clearly telling the people that if they thought a person should get saved by who they are and what they do then nobody was more saved than him. People could think Paul was going upward to heaven by the kind of person he was and how he lived, but as Paul goes on to tell the Philippians and us, this was not the case. What happened is that Paul came to KNOW

CHRIST JESUS. Paul had his Damascus road experience and lots of teaching after that and the Holy Spirit led Paul to discover what he says in verse 9. Paul came to know A RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH DOES NOT COME FROM THE LAW BUT INSTEAD IS A RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH COMES THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST. What Paul came to know from knowing Christ is that none of his proper breeding and his hob knobbing with the who's who of history could make him right with God. Paul realized through Christ that his efforts to make himself right with God by keeping the law did not win him the prize of heaven. What Paul came to know was that his own righteousness was as good as RUBBISH in getting him saved. The Greek word here for rubbish is (skoo bala) and it is a pretty strong word, It is not the word for a candy wrapper dropped as litter on the church lawn. The Greek word here for rubbish is the word for major stinky garbage. And Paul says this stinky garbage is what his own life of good works is worth in getting him into heaven. Paul's own righteousness was worthless and he said HE COUNTED IT AS A LOSS AS FAR AS HELPING HIM TOWARD HIS GOAL OF BEING SAVED.

And this is what we need to realize ourselves. If our goal is to make it into heaven when we die, then we need to realize that only Jesus by his suffering and death on the cross has the power to pay the penalty for our sins and win for us the victory over death by His own resurrection from the dead. By what Christ did His righteousness becomes our righteousness. As far as God is concerned for us who are believers in Christ, we are good to go upward into heaven whenever He wants to call us home. Faith in Jesus gets us into heaven and nothing else. If we have faith, we can know without a doubt where we will go when we die.

Someone who was ready to go to heaven when death came unexpectedly was Todd Beamer. We have recently been remembering the 25th anniversary of 9-11 and the Arab terrorists crashing planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Todd Beamer was flying on a business trip to California on 9-11 when his plane was hijacked by Arab terrorists who were planning to crash the plane into the White House or the Capitol. Todd and his wife Lisa and their family were strong Christians. Todd was only 32 years old and dying that day was not one of his goals. Lisa wrote their story. And what happened is Todd joined with 3 other guys and they decided to attack the terrorists and try to get back control of Flight 93. Todd tried to call Lisa on his cell phone but the connection would not go through and he was re-routed to a GTE supervisor also named Lisa who was with the FBI. Todd and the other folks made their plans. GTE Lisa heard almost everything and when the guys were ready Todd led them in the Lord's Prayer and they recited the 23rd Psalm. Todd told Lisa "If I don't make it, please call my family and let them know how much I love them." And then for Todd Beamer it was onward and upward. The last words Lisa heard from Todd was him saying, "Are you ready? Okay. Let's roll."

In a couple of minutes, it was over. The plane crashed going 563 miles per hour into an empty Pennsylvania field. And because he believed in Jesus and not because he was a hero, at that crash moment Todd Beamer's soul reached its goal of the prize of God calling him upward to heaven.

May we each have heaven as the main goal of our life. And whenever the call of God comes, may we be ready ourselves to go upward to heaven. Amen.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.