

“PRESSING ON FOR THE PRIZE”

I. Introduction

- A. In these verses, the apostle Paul employs an athletic metaphor to describe the Christian life.
- B. He likens being a Christian to competing in a race.
- C. As with an Olympic runner, it is vital that we stay on course and keep on running until we reach the finish.
- D. The goal towards which we are striving is the fullness of the eternal resurrection life that Christ graciously bestows upon us.
- E. As Paul said in the preceding verses, knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection is the one thing in this world that is of surpassing worth, the one thing that matters above all else.
- F. As we study this text this evening, we will see that it teaches us that the Christian life is a life of pressing on to lay hold of the hope that has been laid up for us in heaven.

II. Take Hold of God’s Gifts (12)

- A. The first thing that we see in this text is that the Christian life involves diligently talking hold of the salvation that God has freely given us in Christ.
 - 1. This is the point that Paul is making in verse 12.
 - 2. He begins by saying, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.”

3. Of course, there is a sense in which we have already obtained the prize.
 4. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:6, when we come to saving faith in Christ, God raises us up with Christ and seats us with him in the heavenly places.
 5. In saying this, Paul means that when we are united to Christ we receive title to heaven.
 6. Our heavenly inheritance is secure, but it is not yet in our possession.
 7. As long as we continue in this life, we have to persevere in faith.
 8. This is what Paul is getting at when he says that he does not yet consider himself to have obtained the prize.
- B. Paul also says that he does not consider himself to be perfect.
1. The word “perfect” is from the same root as the word translated as “mature” in verse 15.
 2. This term reminds us that the purpose for which God redeems us and makes us his own is that we might be made holy and perfect.
 3. Paul makes this clear in Romans 8 when he describes the outworking of our salvation by saying, “those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”
 4. Seeing believers conformed to the likeness of the Son was the focus of Paul’s ministry.
 5. He made this clear to the Christians in Colossae when he told them that he and his ministry associates proclaim Christ, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may

present everyone mature in Christ.” (Col. 1:28)

6. The goal of the Christian life is not earthly happiness or material prosperity, though we should certainly be grateful for the many gifts that God gives in this life to cheer our hearts.
 7. But we should always remember that the goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to Christ.
- C. Paul tells the Philippians that he has not yet attained this goal.
1. He says this even though he had gone on multiple missionary journeys to spread the gospel.
 2. He had endured severe opposition for his faith.
 3. He was writing this letter from a Roman prison.
 4. Yet Paul says that he has not yet been made perfect.
 5. He emphasizes this because the Christians in Philippi were being exposed to false teachers who were promoting a form of perfectionism.
 6. These were the figures referred to as “dogs” and “evildoers” earlier in chapter 3.
 7. These false teachers were saying that adherence to the law, especially the ceremonial law, has to be added to faith in order to attain a truly righteous standing before God.
 8. Paul responded to this in the preceding section by saying that we need to renounce any supposed righteousness of our own that comes from the law if we want to obtain the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

9. The person who considers himself to be righteous on the basis of anything that he does is someone who is placing his confidence in the flesh, and the flesh is polluted by sin.
 10. True faith is defined as receiving and resting upon Christ alone for our salvation.
 11. Salvation is entirely of God's grace.
- D. Having made this clear in the first half of chapter 3, Paul now shows us that the gracious nature of our salvation should not make us spiritually lazy.
1. On the contrary, he says, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."
 2. A literal translation of the Greek reads this way: "I still press on so as to grasp it because I was indeed grasped by Christ Jesus."
[O'Brien]
 3. Notice that the verb 'to grasp' is used two times in this sentence.
 4. The first instance is in the active voice, referring to Paul's activity after his conversion.
 5. The second instance is in the passive voice, referring to Paul's conversion.
 6. Paul didn't grasp Jesus.
 7. He was grasped by Jesus.
 8. Jesus made the same point when he told his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16)
 9. But Paul knows that this does not mean that he can just sit back and do nothing.

10. When it comes to our sanctification and growth as Christians, we are called to take on an active roll.
 11. As Paul says earlier in this epistle, we are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, even as we know that God is the one who works in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
- E. Another way of thinking about this is to say that there is a tension between the “already” and the “not yet” in your salvation.
1. If you trust in Christ, then you have *already* been born again.
 2. You have *already* received the grace of justification and adoption.
 3. You are *already* right with God, so that your sin no longer condemns you.
 4. At the same time, you have *not yet* had your sin totally eradicated.
 5. You have *not yet* been made perfectly holy, which is the purpose for which Jesus took hold of you.
 6. God’s purpose is to bring his children into complete conformity to Christ.
 7. One day, that purpose will be brought to completion.
 8. On the last day, when the dead are raised, the regeneration that the Spirit of God has already brought about in you inwardly will be confirmed, publicly and completely.
 9. As Paul said back in chapter 1, “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”
 10. That verse emphasizes that God is the one who does this good work.

11. Salvation is his doing, from beginning to end.
12. But part of the means by which he carries out his work is by calling and equipping us to take hold of what he has promised us in Christ.
13. The way we do this is by believing what God says and by striving to do what he commands.
14. This is how we make the prize our own.

III. Focus on the Goal (13-14)

- A. The next thing that we see in this passage is that the Christian life requires us to forget what lies behind and to strain forward towards our goal.
 1. Now, it is true that the Christian life involves a great deal of remembering.
 2. The Bible frequently warns us against spiritual forgetfulness.
 3. But in this text Paul is speaking of a good kind of forgetfulness.
 4. There were things in Paul's past of which he was not proud.
 5. There were other things in his past in which he might have been tempted to take pride.
 6. But the principle that is set forth here is that we should not dwell on anything in our past in a way that hinders our present progress.
 7. If we keep looking back at the things that are behind us, whether they are good things or bad things, we will not be able to see our way forward.
- B. There are several ways in which you can apply this truth to your life.

1. First, don't get bogged down in thinking about your past sins and failures.
 2. While you do need to repent of your sins, you should not let them paralyze you with guilt or despair.
 3. Your sins are covered by the blood of Christ, and there is now no condemnation for you.
 4. Second, don't let yourself drown in past disappointments and sorrows.
 5. Remind yourself that the Lord is sovereign over everything in your life, even the difficult and disappointing things, and that he will cause all things to work together for your good.
 6. Third, don't rest in your past achievements.
 7. The purpose of Christian service and devotion is not to put God in your debt, but to express your gratitude for the fact that God has freely given you a gift that you could never deserve and never repay.
- C. Instead of looking back, Paul keeps his eyes fixed upon the prize that the Lord has set before him.
1. He describes this prize as "the upward call of God."
 2. Paul uses the term "upward" because he is speaking of heaven, the Christian's true homeland.
 3. This teaches us that the heavenly should have the place of priority in our lives.
 4. Our supreme goal should not be anything that belongs to the things of the earth, not even the renewal of the earth.

5. To think that way is to make God a means to an end.
 6. We need to remember that God himself is the end.
 7. Our goal is to attain to the world where we will live in full and perfect communion with our God.
- D. We should also note that Paul speaks of this goal as something that is brought about by God.
1. It is “the upward call of *God*.”
 2. This is a reference to God’s effectual call.
 3. It is the call by which God brings us to saving faith and makes us heirs of his promises.
 4. In the words of J.A. Motyer, the call of which Paul speaks in this verse “is not God’s invitation to be saved; it is God’s determination to save.” [178]
 5. Our Shorter Catechism defines it this way: “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.” [Q/ A 31]
 6. God is the one who effectually calls us to himself, and we need to respond to his call by continuing to press on to obtain the prize that he has set before us.
 7. The basis of our confidence as we press on in the life of faith is the fact that God is determined to save us.

IV. Grow in Grace

- A. This brings us to verses 15 and 16, where Paul urges his readers to grow in grace.
1. He begins by addressing those who are “mature,” urging them to see these things the same way that he does.
 2. In other words, no Christian should think that he has obtained the goal of the Christian life or already been made perfect.
 3. Every Christian should keep pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of him.
 4. Paul’s words here remind us that a key mark of Christian maturity is recognizing that you still have a lot of growing to do.
 5. As long as you remain in this body of flesh, you still have a long ways to go before you reach the goal of your salvation.
- B. You can also trust that the same Lord who has been at work in your life up until now is continuing his gracious work in you and will bring it to completion.
1. This is what Paul means in the second part of verse 15 when he tells the Philippians “and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”
 2. Paul trusts that God will lead these Christians further into the truth.
 3. The Lord will remove the errors, weaknesses, and inconsistencies that remain in their way of thinking.
 4. We can trust that the Lord will do the same thing for us.
- C. Our text ends with one final exhortation in verse 16: “Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”
1. This is another key to growing in grace.

2. Never lose sight of the basics.
3. It can be easy for Christians to neglect worship, prayer, and their Bibles.
4. But if you do that, you will be drifting away from the very things on which the Christian life is built.
5. Make sure you live by the light that you have already received.
6. You will not be able to progress any further in the faith if you neglect what you have already learned and attained.

V. Conclusion

- A. What a wonderful thing it is for you to know that Jesus Christ has taken hold of you.
 1. He has not taken hold of you because of anything that you have done, but because of his unfathomable grace.
 2. And he has taken hold of you for a purpose.
 3. He intends to bring you into full and perfect communion with the living God in a world that is free from all evil and suffering.
 4. That is indeed a prize of surpassing worth.
- B. Remember that, as long as you continue living in this world, you have not yet attained to that prize.
 1. You have not yet completed the race that your God has set before you.
 2. So make sure that you run the race of faith all the way to the finish.
 3. Press on toward the goal, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.