

Running to Obtain the Prize

Philippians 3:7-10, 14

- Paul tells the church here that he had goals he was aiming at and pressing on toward obtaining
 - Even with all that God had used him to do, being an apostle to numerous churches in various regions and having written 2/3 of the New Testament, he still had goals that he wanted to obtain in his life
 - In verse 13, Paul looked at his life and ministry and did not consider himself to have apprehended all his goals; he did believe he had yet fulfilled his ministry or arrived at the finish line
- We must understand in running our race that we cannot allow success to become a hindrance
 - Many times it can be easy to lose focus on our goals if we allow our times of success *to please us to the point that we become comfortable and less passionate about the Lord*
 - We must fervently press to maintain the passion and zeal for the Lord if we want to remain focused, not just to run the race, but to obtain the prize and eventually hear, “well done, good and faithful servant”
 - God does take pleasure in His children’s prosperity (*Psalms 35:27*), but *what we must never allow is for our prosperity and success to hinder the drive to fulfill our calling in life*
- Some of the goals Paul was aiming to take possession of are mentioned in verses 8-10
 - Vs. 8: the excellence of the knowledge of Christ
 - Vs. 9: laying aside his righteousness and having the righteousness of God
 - Vs. 10: to know Christ and the power of His resurrection
 - Vs. 10: to know the fellowship of His sufferings
- It was having these goals engrafted into his spirit that motivated Paul to push and persevere toward seizing them
 - These goals accompanied with the power of the Holy Spirit are what kept him strengthened during the tests and persecution
 - God’s plan for every believer must become so clear and distinct, filling us with passion to pursue those goals

- Two of the best examples of having a distinct image of the prize is *Abraham focusing on the goal of becoming the father of many nations and the woman with the issue of blood*
 - Abraham
 - The reason Abraham was unwavering in his faith is because the expectation of God's covenant promise was clear in his mind
 - He was then able to apply his faith in God's promise and see its fulfillment, *rather than focusing on seemingly insurmountable problems*
 - Even when Isaac was born and the promise manifested, he was still so unwavering that he was willing to offer Isaac on the alter as a sacrifice
 - Woman with the issue of blood
 - This woman had lived through physical turmoil for years, but saw Jesus' garment as the mark for her healing; she confessed her faith, by saying "if she could just touch His garment, she would be made whole"
 - In the midst of all the hindrances, this woman was persistent in not letting the distractions divert her attention
 - If she had seen all those in the crowd swarming around Him and allowed it to quench her desire to be healed, the disease would have killed her
 - She was so fixed on the goal that she fought her way through the crowd, touched His garment and connected to the anointing, resulting in her healing
 - When we choose to focus on any mark in our lives and pursue it in faith, we can be sure that the Lord is faithful to lead us to the prize
- However, verse 13 tells us what must be done before we can even begin pursuing our goals: we must decide to *forget what has happened in our past*
 - *Satan will magnify the mistakes of your past* to deceive you into thinking that you cannot be an asset for God's kingdom
 - Because of Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary, the condemnation of our former life has been eliminated
 - We must place our trust in God that when our sins were washed in the blood of Jesus, they were *remitted and forgotten* by the Father, not merely atoned for

- If God has forgotten our sins then we should follow His example and do the same
- Once this happens, the weight of our former sins and shortcomings cannot bear us down, giving us confidence to run our race in life
- In verse 14, there are two words that describe Paul's resolve
 - The first is *press*; one meaning of this word means to “*set in rapid motion*”
 - Paul's motivation and desire *was not just a flimsy or weak desire* that amounted to nothing more than a wish, but one that was *aggressively* moving him toward those goals
 - He was committed to doing whatever it took to obtain the prize, regardless of the cost to him either spiritually or physically
 - The next word is *mark*; this is very revealing and it means “*to have a watchful glance on something, LIKE A SPY OR SCOUT*”
 - This reveals how intensely Paul was fixed on the mark for his life
 - Just as a spy or scout would *examine his target, focus on the smallest details and do so without distraction*, we must be fixed on our mark
 - This is what allowed him to declare in *2 Timothy 4:7* that he had run his race and finished his course; he took precise aim at his target and hit it
 - Believers must not allow the distractions of this world or the attacks of the enemy to divert their attention away from their race
 - This is one of the enemy's most effective tools because if he can lead believers away from their path, he can keep them from helping to expand the kingdom of God
 - *If he can keep you diverted, he can eliminate your effectiveness and when he does that, he does not have to fight against you*
 - *The only time we have to fight the good fight of faith is when we are determined to live a life of faith*
 - If we do not live by faith and believe in who we are called to be in Christ, there is no fight of faith to be waged
 - Satan never wastes his time with those who do not threaten the kingdom of darkness; *he concentrates on those who shine the light of God to drive out the darkness*

Hebrews 12:1-3

- This passage reemphasizes what Paul told the church at Phillipi; the author of Hebrews says that in order to run our race, we must lay aside 2 hindrances: *the weights of the world and sin*
 - The weights referred to in this verse can be different than sin, which are seen in its translation: *fleshly burdens*
 - The burdens that weigh many believers down may not necessarily be sinful, but they are hindrances that keep us from partaking of God's best
 - These hindrances can be things like wrong relationships, money, laziness, being undisciplined and the such
 - These weights must be thrown off our spiritual backs if we are to effectively run our race
 - Next, we must not allow ourselves to be easily entangled in sin by going against God's Word and rebelling
 - These are traps designed by Satan to attach yokes of bondage on our lives, which, if not destroyed by the anointing, will ultimately render us ineffective for God's kingdom
 - We must avoid sin by keeping our eyes focused on the prize rather than the temporary pleasures of the flesh
- Another key to obtaining the prize is that *we cannot be spiritual sprinters, but rather long distance runners in the Spirit*
 - The key to spiritual endurance is to be steadfast and patiently running our race, rather than trying to run ahead of the Lord's guidance
 - The body of Christ must develop some spiritual backbone rather than being discouraged every time the clouds get grey and thunder crashes near us
 - We must endure through the tests designed to abruptly stop our race and rely on Him to see us through the storms of life
 - However, every believer must be aware that *sometimes God will deliver us from the storms and other times faithfully see us through the storms*

- Just because we go through a storm in life rather than being delivered from it does not mean that we have sinned, but it is a *testing of our faith, requiring us to walk by faith and not by sight*
 - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego
 - Daniel and the lions den
 - Paul and Silas in jail
- When we endure the storms of life, we become stronger in our faith and more difficult for the enemy to stop, making us a more skillful tool in God's hands

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Paul shows the Corinthians further truths concerning our race

- *We cannot assume that there are many ways to obtain the prize for our lives*
 - If this were not true, Paul would have simply told them to run the race, but he did not; he shows them that *there is a specific way that leads us to our finish line*
 - To end up at a specific point, we can only arrive there through following the counsel of the Holy Spirit
 - We must not go down our path randomly making turns, but relying on the Spirit's guidance every time there is a turn on our course
- Because *the path for our life is specific for each believer*, we will receive specific guidance, showing us that we *cannot rely on the way others have gone down their path*
 - The experiences of others can be a source of help, but *we must never allow them to take precedence over the leadership of the Holy Spirit*
 - When imperfect people become our guideposts, we set ourselves up to be diverted from our race and *have to backtrack just to get back into the race*
- We must get the revelation in our hearts that *our crown is not a corruptible crown, but an incorruptible one*
 - If natural athletes can spend hours each day training to win prizes that give temporary joy, how much more should believers be dedicated and passionate about obtaining a crown that lasts for eternity?
 - If athletes can discipline themselves to advance, *how much more committed should we be toward the Word of God, walking in faith and developing our relationship with the Father?*

- This is only possible when the truth goes from our head to our heart; when we see our prize as eternal and desire to do the works the Father has ordained us to do
- This revelation gives life and strength to our commitments, enabling us to lay aside the weights and run with endurance
- Next, Paul said that he did not fight like someone who beats the air
 - Believers who act this way are those who walk in ignorance, not fixed on their mark, which causes us to senselessly waste our time
 - We must have light in the Word so that our running is not pointless or without direction
 - We must know the mark for our life, commit to pursuing it and do so skillfully so our running is not in vain
- Finally, Paul says here that in order to obtain the prize, we must discipline our bodies
 - Too often we focus so much on the finish line that we lose sight on the steps required to get to the finish line
 - Yes, we must continually keep our eyes on the prize, but we must be just as focused on our present responsibilities that enable us to finish our race
 - We discipline our bodies so that the fleshly desires of the world do not prevent us from experiencing God's best
 - Discipline is undesirable a great deal of the time, but can be accomplished when our hunger to obtain the prize outweighs the lusts of the flesh
 - Furthermore, the more we discipline our flesh, the weaker it gets, making our inner man stronger in the Spirit and more resistant to the pleasures of the world

2 Timothy 2:3-10

Here we see Paul exhorting Timothy on how he can obtain the prize in his life

- The first instruction given to Timothy is to endure hardship as a good soldier in Christ
 - This is a perfect analogy because all soldiers are trained not to give any place to hardship, no matter what the cost

- Far too often, members of the Body flee at the first sign of hardship; rather than learning to develop a resolve to encounter hardship and push through it, they allow an already defeated enemy to overcome them
- Just as we work to train our physical bodies, we must work even more so to develop our spirit in order to be a tenacious soldier, well-equipped to fight the good fight of faith
- If we are in the army of Christ, *then we must imitate the head of that army*, Jesus Christ, who endured more hardship than anyone could comprehend
- Because He endured all the persecution of men and suffered for our sakes, we must be just as willing to push through the persecution of the god of this world if we are going to rule as kings in this life
- This attitude of a good soldier can be seen in **Joshua 1:11** as the nation of Israel prepares to possess the promised land
 - Here Joshua shows a focused resolve in their attack; he gives a specific timeline when they would attack as well as the command to have all provisions required to take the land
 - This is the attitude of a true soldier's mentality: *focused, calculated and ready to do whatever is necessary to obtain victory, not being influenced by any aspect of the enemy*
 - This determination is not gotten by wishing, or even desiring to have it, but must be developed often in the heat of battle; those who develop this attitude and those who don't separates those who overcome the enemy and those who are overcome by the enemy

1 Thess. 5:7-9

A crucial factor for anyone to be a good soldier is shown in verse 7: we must be soberly standing our ground in God's army

- Paul distinguishes the lifestyle of those in the world and those in God's kingdom by comparing night and day
 - Those in the world live for the moment and willingly yield themselves to destruction through sin
 - However, children of God must lead a life completely opposite of the world, ones who soberly endure through tests and trials to obtain salvation

- The word sober here means “*the opposite of intoxication; clear-headed*”
 - This gives the idea of being spiritually intoxicated, or *being spiritually polluted by the ways of the world to the point that we cannot be steadfast or self-controlled*
 - When we do this, we become just as polluted as the world, having to be washed in the blood of Jesus to again be a light to the world
 - Rather than submitting to the twisted ways of the world, we must choose to walk in the Spirit
- This unwavering commitment removes the world’s influence, strengthening us to run our race, not merely to run but to obtain

Each of us has been given a specific race to run by our Heavenly Father, a race that only we can run and an outcome determined by us alone. Our Lord has done all that is required for us to run our race successfully, but every believer must make the conscious decision to consistently perform the necessities required to run the race and obtain the prize. We cannot be as Paul described, “one who beats the air,” as one not knowing what their goal is nor how to obtain it. When we feed on the Word of God, yield to the counsel of the Spirit and develop the attitude of a true soldier in God’s army, we will walk in victory. God can use us to shine as a light in a dark world and give glory to God. This is what distinguishes the day from the night, the believer from the unbeliever, and allows us to be more than conquerors through Jesus Christ.