

Pressing Onward

Philippians 3:12-14 - "12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.

13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,

14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul's main focus in the middle of chapter 3 is perseverance.

Philippians 3:12 - "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me."

"Not that I have already attained"

Paul never viewed the Christian prize of eternal salvation as being something that one might get in any final and irrevocable act. His view was that the Christian life was a race to be won, a life to be lived, a course to be completed, and that no one ever had it made until life was completed.

Paul is not expressing a lack of confidence by these words. This was merely his way of saying that he was still running the Christian race. We must never be content with partial attainment.

"or am already perfected"

There are two different uses of the word "perfect," in **verse 12** and in **verse 15**. The Greek word is the same in both cases. In **verse 12**, Paul is speaking of that personal and individual final perfection in heaven which God will give to every Christian on the last day. **Verse 15** is a reference to the perfection of Christ which belongs to every Christian because we are in Him.

Matthew 5:48 says "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Jesus here refers to the law of absolute perfection that underlies eternal salvation. No one ever attained such perfection on his own in this life except the Lord Jesus. But every Christian enjoys that status as a result of being baptized into Christ and identified with Christ. It was that status which Paul referred to in **verse 15**.

Colossians 1:28 says "Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

The great goal of Christianity is that of presenting every man "perfect in Christ Jesus."

Through faith, repentance, and baptism into Christ the sinner rises to walk in newness of life with a new identity, being no longer himself, but Christ. As Paul stated in **Galatians 2:20**, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." This is the perfection required of all those whom God will receive. It is the perfection of Christ.

Philippians 3:13 - "Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,"

"Apprehended or laid hold" This was a favorite expression with Paul. He viewed the priceless gift of eternal life as a prize to be seized eagerly and without delay. It was something to be taken with determination and never to let go. It was that same determined seizing and laying hold of which had described the Savior's laying hold on him for the preaching of the truth, hence the words in **verse 12** - "Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me."

The description is that of a race, in which Paul, like an eager runner, stretches out continually to “grasp” the prize. But he is unwilling to lay too much stress on his own efforts. So he remembers that he himself was once grasped by the saving hand of Christ. Only this put Paul in a condition to grasp the prize of heaven.

"forgetting those things which are behind." Paul was not one to live in the past. He properly appreciated the past, but his thoughts focused upon the future. The great prize still lay forward at the goal line.

Many Christians and churches rest on their past achievements instead of focusing on what we still should be doing. We should not be self-satisfied. We must live as if our task is ahead of us rather than behind. This approach will prevent us from thinking only of the past. We are all tempted to live in the past. When we live in the past, we rob ourselves of our future.

This does not mean that we should fail to learn from our mistakes or appreciate our successes. But dwelling on them hinders future work. It is so easy to see the negative in every situation. We can become so obsessed with the shortcomings of ourselves and others and the church that we fail to look for the good and positives.

There may be things in our past of which we are ashamed and which might haunt us. But if we have handed them over to God in confession and faith, He has put them away and forgotten them and so should we.

Just how did Paul forget the past? Paul's did not let the things in the past overshadow the present. He let the past, both good and bad, be in the past, constantly looking forward to the work God had for him to do. All Christians need to do the same thing.

Paul certainly did not forget his knowledge of the Bible, nor God's grace or God's great mercies. His writings prove this.

"reaching forward to those things which are ahead"

This literally means to stretch out or towards something. A runner in a race will lean forward toward the finish line with the goal in view.

Philippians 3:14 - "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

The Greek word for "press toward" is a stronger word than the one translated "reaching forward" in **verse 13**.

"Reaching forward" indicates the direction one is headed toward the goal.

"Press toward" indicates using pressure in progressing toward that goal.

This goal served as a powerful motivation for Paul. He was focused on obtaining the heavenly reward that waits for those who are obedient to Christ. Heaven will be worth whatever you have to endure. Keep your eye on **that** goal.

The ultimate prize cannot be obtained without both effort and focus. This is the image of a runner diligently seeking to complete a race. Faced with the choice of giving up or going on, the runner decides to press on and finish the race. This decision is possible because he keeps the reward in mind. He is not willing to quit in spite of pain and exhaustion. His focus on the goal helped him to maintain his faith in the midst of persecution.

Paul's intense yearning and striving for spiritual perfection is illustrated by the familiar foot race. Paul's language is similar to the vivid accounts of the ancient Olympic contests in the cities of the old Greek empire. The modern Olympics are just as powerful examples in which the agony of defeat and the thrill of victory are seen as clearly today as when viewed by the apostle nearly two thousand years ago. Of course, in this verse, it is the eagerness and determination of the contestant to win which dominate Paul's thought.

There is a contrast in the matter of how many may win. In athletic contests, only one receives the prize. One wins and the others do not. **1 Corinthians 9:24** says "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it." But in the heavenly contest, everyone may win. Our victory does not depend upon competing against each other. Anyone who runs well may win. If all run well, all may win!

The winner of the contest is rewarded. The athlete wins perishable rewards of money, trophies, ribbons, and praise. The Christian receives an eternal reward in heaven that lasts forever. **1 Corinthians 9:25** says "And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown."

Hebrews 12:1 says "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us," Notice 3 details from this verse.

1. A host of spectators watch a race in the Olympic coliseums. Likewise, many witnesses are watching how we run our race of life.
2. For the participant in an athletic event, discipline is an absolute prerequisite of success. Likewise, Christians must "lay aside every weight, and the sin that so easily ensnares us" in order to win.
3. Patience or endurance is required of both the athlete and the Christian to win in both of their races. "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."
The race Christians must run is neither a jog nor a stroll, but a race, a difficult struggle. The word for race is the Greek word *agona* from which we get our word *agony*. The race of life is an agonizing, grueling course and requires Christian endurance if one is to win. Patience is not merely sitting down and waiting until something happens. It means endurance and the power of perseverance including the ability to finish what is begun. This metaphor of the race of life was especially meaningful to Paul who referred to it in the last letter he ever wrote, saying, "I have finished the race." in **2 Timothy 4:7**.

A participant must be legally enrolled in a contest in order to win. **2 Timothy 2:5** says "And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." The Christian participant must follow the rules in the Bible by obeying the gospel by confessing their faith in Christ as God's Son, repenting of their sins, being baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, and accepting full obligations of Christian service in the church.

Philippians chapter 3 gives us four good reasons to press onward.

1. True joy is found only in the Lord.
2. Some things are more important than others.
3. Important work remains to be done.
4. Heaven is the ultimate prize.