

16.

The Apostle Paul, Pressing On to the Goal of Eternal Life

The Apostle Paul understood his relationship with the Lord to be a covenantal one in which certain conditions had to be met. He understood the commands from Jesus to be more than encouragements for godly living, and a necessary consequence of being justified by faith alone. Eternal life itself hung in the balance for God's apostle. Blessings and curses had been laid before Paul and he was bound and determined to gain the blessings.

Prior to 1 Corinthians 9:23, Paul described his mission as a commission to proclaim the gospel, to be a herald of the good news of the New Covenant for all peoples. Then in verse 23 he relates to the Corinthians the reason he is diligent to carry out his mission. "I do all on account of the gospel, in order that I may be its fellow partaker." Paul understood his mission as a means by which he, himself, would be a sharer in the benefits of the gospel.

This statement needs further clarification. Is this a reference to his own salvation, or is it a reference to a future enjoyment that is above and beyond salvation, like increasing rewards in heaven? The language of verse 23 is vague because of its brevity, therefore it could be taken either way. However, Paul's reasoning steers us in just one direction.

He asks a question that is meant to shed light on what he had just written, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run in order that you obtain it." (v. 24) But what is "it"? In verse 24 we see that "it" refers to "the prize." But this still begs the question of the meaning of "the prize." Is it a reference to rewards in heaven, or heaven itself? Verse 25 provides the answer. Paul relates that the athlete exercises self control in order to get a "perishable crown," but we do it to get one that is "imperishable."

What does Paul now mean by an imperishable crown?

Jesus Himself can help us with this, because in Revelation 2:10 He mentions the “crown of life”; a metaphor for eternal life itself. This is clearly Jesus’ intention in Revelation 2:10, because the alternative to receiving the crown of life is the “second death” of hell. It makes the most sense to understand Jesus’ crown of life to be Paul’s imperishable crown, which represents eternal life. So as we use Scripture to interpret Scripture we are able to discern the prize to be eternal life itself. The imperishable crown to be gained is the crown of life and *not* hell as the alternative.

Paul then describes how “he beats his body and makes it his slave so that... I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Co. 9:27). So Paul’s concern is that he, after preaching to others, will not fail to obtain eternal life, which we now know is the prize. This interpretation is further confirmed by what Paul understands to be the alternative to gaining the prize. The NIV translates Paul’s concern to be a concern about being “disqualified for the prize.” The Greek word translated as “disqualified” occurs five other times in the New Testament, and every time it deals with a person being rejected by God (Rom. 1:28; 2 Co. 13:5-7; 2 Ti. 3:8; Tit. 1:6; Heb. 6:8). Hebrews 6:8 reads, “But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is *disqualified* and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.” All the evidence points to the fact that Paul’s concern for himself was not about losing rewards in heaven, it was much more serious than that, his concern was for reaching the prize, the imperishable crown, which is heaven itself.

But how did Paul see himself being “qualified” for the prize of eternal life? Was it by maintaining an ongoing understanding of Jesus’ unconditional love for him based on faith alone? Clearly not. He wrote that he “beats his body and makes it his slave” so that he might *not* be disqualified for the prize. He is building off his athlete analogy where “self control” was the key point. An athlete exercises self control in diet and exercise so he can win the prize. Paul understood that it was necessary for him to exercise self control, not with diet and exercise, but with sin. He must not let sin be his master, but like Cain was commanded by God, he must master it. He must be a slave to righteousness and not to sin.

So Paul’s fear was that after preaching the necessity for self control to the churches, he personally would fail to exercise it and be rejected by God. Paul was motivated by a covenantal fear of the Lord. He knew the blessings and the curses that were laid out before him, and because he desired God more than anything, he would fight hard for the

prize in the good fight of the faith. This all sheds light on what Paul means in verse 23 by “becoming all things to all men, in order that I may be a fellow partaker” of the gospel. He means nothing less than partaking in the salvation that the gospel offers.

We also find Paul writing similar teachings in his letter to the church in Philippi. Philippians 3:7-14 reveals a pronounced tension between Paul’s present experience of “knowing Christ” and what is to be obtained in the future. Paul relates how he “counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v. 8a). The *knowing* is clearly a present reality. He knows Jesus, and this is further emphasized by Paul’s affectionate reference to Jesus as *my* Lord. With this established in the first section, Paul proceeds with the second section of verse 8 by presenting a future reality. Paul has lost all things and even considers them rubbish, “in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...” Once more Paul employs a verb form, which carries the sense of a future-uncertain, yet hoped-for reality. “That I *may gain* Christ and *be found* in Him” (v. 8b).

Paul has left behind all his former social, religious and economic advantages in order that he *may gain* Christ, or, that he *may be found* in Christ. This entails a great deal of suffering that Paul considers to be a necessary exercise in cross-bearing. It is for him a personal experience of Christ’s sufferings, “becoming like him in His death,” and the result for him will be the same result that was for Jesus. Jesus attained to the resurrection by His suffering while obeying the Father. In the same way, Paul is to attain to the resurrection by his suffering while obeying Jesus.

But just as the promise of Jesus’ resurrection lay before Him during His earthly ministry, and was no doubt a source of great comfort for Him (Heb. 12:1-3), so the promise of Paul’s resurrection lay before him as his inspiration to press on. “Becoming like Him in His death, that *if possible I may attain* to the resurrection from the dead” (v. 11). The future, not yet attained, is the emphasis here. Paul expresses his hope “that *I may attain*,” and this future hope that has not yet been attained is emphasized with the introduction of his statement with his insertion of “*if possible*.”

You get a palpable sense of Paul’s leaning forward, to the future, and this sense is fanned into flames in verses 12-14. Paul has “not already attained all this or am already perfect.” Paul has not already “gained Christ,” and he does not already “know Christ” in the way in which he hopes to know Him at the resurrection. Verse 12 reveals this sense of covenantal tension in which Paul is already

“knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” and yet hoping to “know Christ” and to be “found in Him.” Paul “presses on that I *may* grasp [Him], because I *was grasped* by Christ Jesus.” In verse 13, Paul emphasizes his contingent position when he writes, “Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold [of Him].” So what does Paul do? He forgets what is behind and presses forward “according to the goal, to the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (v.14). What is the prize? Paul here describes it here as the “upward call.” Once again, it is the prize *of* the upward call or in other words, eternal life. Eternal life is entered by means of the resurrection from the dead, to be raised to life. So it is clear, that in these passages, while Paul has been grasped by Christ and knows him, it is also no less true that he sees himself as needing to “press on” to take hold of nothing less than eternal life.

This should all sound familiar. Just as Israel, at Mount Sinai, was already the Lord’s treasured possession, Israel needed be faithful to the Lord by keeping His commands, so that they might continue to be the Lord’s treasured possession. Paul, too, was in covenant with the Lord. He has been grasped by Christ and called into a relationship with Him. Now Paul was to press on in faithfulness to his Lord, and be willing to suffer like Jesus did, in order to remain as Jesus’ treasured possession.

The apostle Paul had no knowledge of faith alone as a way in which this was done. This was not what he believed about his own life, let alone what he taught others. He had to suffer for Jesus, and he had to suffer because he had to obey. As he wrote in Romans 2:7, “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.”