

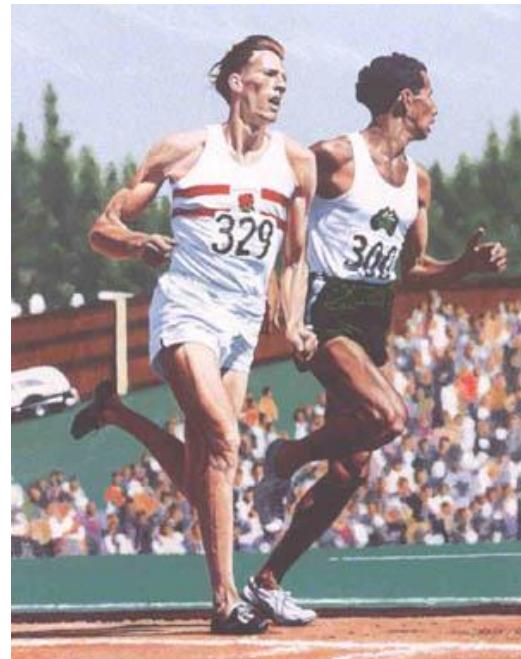
Philippians

Part 16 – The Christian’s Restful Running

Philippians 3:12-16

The great ambition of Paul’s life was to know Christ in all His fullness. There was no goal which rose to higher prominence in the heart of the apostle than life with Jesus in the age to come. He explains that the great end toward which he presses is “the resurrection from the dead” (3:11). Though he knew Christ in this life Paul longed for nothing more than to know Him in all His fullness beyond this fallen world.

That is the same finish line toward which all Christians ought to strain. Having been justified by His grace the Christian’s life becomes one of restful running whereby they see all of life in light of Christ’s glory which will be revealed in the new creation.



Main Idea: The Christian life is one of pursuing Christlikeness in this life with the ultimate goal of being with Jesus in the age to come.

Vs. 12 – Paul does not supply the object of the verb in the first clause. The Greek literally reads, “Not that I’ve already obtained...” The lack of an explicit direct object for the verb “obtained” indicates that he is talking about obtaining what he has just mentioned in vv. 10-11, namely, the resurrection, Christ-likeness, and the full knowledge of Jesus Christ that will then be his [Silva, 174]. The second clause confirms that he longs to have what he does not yet possess: eternal life with Christ in the age to come.

Paul is careful to point out that his all striving after what he does not yet have is the result of Christ having already laid hold of him. As always the Christian’s striving is the response to grace.

Vs. 13 – Paul qualifies his stated goal with the recognition that it has not yet been reached. He is, after all, referring to an apprehension of Christ which will only be fulfilled in the age to come. His “forgetting what lies behind” most likely includes both his pre and post-conversion experiences. The language of “straining” is not in conflict with God’s grace.

Vs. 14 – Though salvation is the gift of God Paul is energized to press on ahead for the ultimate prize which Christ himself. The Christian life is not one of passive repose but active engagement. The runner can see the finish line and spends his energy pressing toward it. Again, the age to come is in view here. Paul’s hope is fixed not on life in this passing age but on Christ in the new creation.

Vs. 15 – Paul may be offering a gentle “dig” at those who believe they have reached perfection with his call to the “mature” to think of themselves, like him, as having not yet reached the goal. The second half of the sentence is a bit tricky. It is most likely a reiteration of one of the great themes of the epistle which is unity among the fellowship. So Silva suggests: “But if there continue to be some disagreements among you, I trust that God will soon bring unanimity in your midst” (179).

Vs. 16 – Paul appeals to the Philippian believers to behave in a way that is consistent with the truth they have received.

1. The Starting Blocks: Resting in the Gracious Grip of Christ

Vs. 12c – “...because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

Vs. 14 – “...the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 8:29-30; Gal 1:15-16)

Vs. 16 – “Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”

- Paul’s eyes are focused on what lies ahead. Nevertheless his confidence in running is grounded in the grace he has already received from Christ.

- Three times in this relatively brief passage Paul acknowledges that all of his striving and pressing on are rooted in God's grace toward him. In doctrinal terms we would say that our sanctification (progressive growth in Christlikeness) proceeds from our justification (having been declared righteous by God by grace alone). The running and striving of the Christian life is done not in order *to be* justified but out of the restful knowledge that we *have been* justified by the work of Christ.

2. The Running: Forgetting and Pressing Forward

Vv. 12-14 – "...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead..."

- Paul repeats himself in almost identical terms by pointing out that he has not yet reached the goal. One might assume that Paul, given his singular desire to know Christ, had arrived spiritually speaking. But he wants his friends to avoid the error of perfectionism (the notion that we can achieve perfection in this life). So, he humbly acknowledges twice that he has not yet obtained his goal. Until they see Jesus, Christians will struggle against their own sin and frailties. This is the mindset of the mature believer (vs. 15).
- Paul portrays the Christian as a runner who is single-minded in a present pursuit. The runner portrayed is more of a marathoner than a sprinter. The running requires a refusal to be distracted by ground already covered, past successes, or past failures.
- Christians need not avoid the language of striving as though such notions are inherently legalistic. The Bible provides the Christian with a vast array of calls to actively pursue holiness, godliness, faith, love, Christlikeness, etc.

3. The Goal and Prize: To Gain Christ in His Fullness

Vs. 12a-b – "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own..." (Phil 3:10-11)

Vs. 14

- The goal toward which Paul presses with such determination is to gain Christ in all his fullness. For Paul being made "perfect" is to be freed from death, the final enemy, and to know the power of Christ's resurrection in the new creation. No longer will he be corruptible and fallen. His eyes are fixed on the final and ultimate deliverance promised in Christ.
- "The most intense pleasure of Heaven is found in John's vision of the coming New Jerusalem, in which God's 'servants will worship him. They will see his face' (Rev 22:3-4). As a result, as John writes elsewhere, 'we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). This is the prize that Paul sees as he stretches his stride toward the goal: that he, his Philippians friends, and all others who trust in Jesus will know Christ as they have been known by Christ (1 Cor 13:12)." (D. Johnson, 217).

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are some differences between justification and sanctification?
2. What makes a sinner justified before God?
3. What is grace?
4. What are some proper ways to think about striving in the Christian life? What are some inappropriate ways?
5. How might you apply "forgetting what lies behind"?
6. What is the goal toward which Paul is pressing?
7. Why do you think that goal sounds so foreign to people today (including Christians)?
8. How might you more faithfully press on toward that same goal?