

to result in his death.

Here the Apostle reminds all of us how much we must long to be like Yeshua, which includes having the same goal that He had as He humbled Himself to bring about the divine plan of salvation. This causes us to constantly ask ourselves an all-important question: “Is serving the Lord and living to bring about His purposes my highest goal in life?” As we seek to have this as our life priority, we will likewise desire to find any and all means that strengthen us to reach this goal.

The ultimate goal which Paul has is “to attain to the resurrection of the dead.” This does not mean that he had any fear that he might not attain this goal. Rather, by the phrase “to attain to the resurrection of the dead,” he means to finally and eternally dwell with Yeshua. In other words, the ultimate goal that Paul had, and that every believer should have, is to hear the words from Yeshua Himself: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” (Matt 25:21)

12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Messiah Yeshua.

The opening words, “Not that...” (Ὁὐχ ὅτι, *oux hoti*) are an ellipsis (short way of saying something) for οὐ λέγω ὅτι, *ou legō hoti*, “I did not say.” Paul quite often uses this formula to qualify something in the previous context to make sure his readers do not misunderstand or misinterpret what he has said.¹ His point is that his emphasis in the previous verse regarding knowing Yeshua, the power of His resurrection, participation in His sufferings, and conforming to His death should not be understood by his readers as though he had considered himself to have already reached the goal of complete and ultimate victory over the flesh. In short, Paul wants to make it clear that he is not teaching “perfectionism,” that the believer in Yeshua can, in this life, reach such a level of holiness that he or she has reached spiritual perfection and thus no longer must war against the sinful nature.

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect – Here Paul explains that which comprises the final and ultimate goal of the believer in Yeshua, namely, to reach perfection.² And he makes it very

1 Cf. 2Cor 1:24; 3:5; 7:9; Phil 4:11, 17; 2Thess 3:9).

2 τετελείωμαι, *teteleiwmai* < τελειόω, *teleioō*, “to complete, finish, bring to an end, accomplish.” Though found 23 times in the Apostolic Scriptures, Paul uses this word only here in all of his epistles.

clear that he had not reached this ultimate goal of final and complete sanctification. One manuscript inserts the phrase “or have already been justified,”¹ giving the interpretation that Paul is speaking about “justification,” but this is obviously wrong, because the believer’s justification is complete, for justification means to be “declared righteous” on the basis of Yeshua’s having paid the debt of sin. Sanctification is becoming more and more conformed to what God has already declared us to be.

Thus, it seems clear in our verse Paul is emphasizing that even though the believer in Yeshua stands justified in the court of heaven, each one who is “in Yeshua” proves his or her true identity through the process of becoming more and more conformed to Him, in thought, word, and actions.

...but I press on – This short phrase emphasizes the central theme of these final verses of chapter 3 (vv. 12–21). It is this ultimate goal of full victory over sin and conformity to the holiness won for us by Messiah that Paul refers to when he writes that he had not fully obtained this level of perfection but that he “presses on,” that is, he continues to have his eye upon the finish line, and presses forward in the spiritual “race” of gaining more and more victories over the sinful flesh, thus growing in holiness and likeness to Yeshua. Indeed, Paul often uses the footrace to describe the life of the believer in this fallen world.²

Calvin puts it this way regarding Paul’s words here:

He adds, that he has not as yet arrived at this. At what? At the attainment of having entire fellowship in Christ’s sufferings, having a full taste of the power of his resurrection, and knowing him perfectly. He teaches, therefore, by his own example, that we ought to make progress, and that the knowledge of Christ is an attainment of such difficulty, that even those who apply themselves exclusively to it, do nevertheless not attain perfection in it so long as they live.³

And Garland gives this excellent picture of the runner in a race as explaining Paul’s meaning:

The runner is not to be congratulated for running three laps well in a four-lap race. Nor does a runner who expects to win

1 **P**⁴⁶, doubtlessly this was added to offer an interpretation of Paul’s words but it is a singular addition not supported by other manuscripts.

2 Cf. Acts 20:24; Rom 9:16; 1Cor 9:24–26; Gal 5:7; 2Tim 4:7.

3 Calvin, *Philippians*, p. 101.

a race look behind and bask in the effort expended so far but instead strains every muscle to reach the finish line. One cannot run well looking backward. In the same way, Paul does not rest on his merits as a zealous Pharisee or as a Christian apostle. Martin Luther observes that the nature of the Christian life does not lie in what one has become but in what one is becoming.¹

Ultimately it is only when we leave our earthly dwelling and enter into eternity with our Messiah that the believer is rid of the sinful nature and the goal of full victory over the sinful nature will be obtained, as Paul notes in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. (1Cor 15:54, quoting Is 25:8)

Yet let us understand and be encouraged by Paul's words, "but I press on." Surely the mark of the redeemed soul is that one longs to glorify God for His unspeakable gift of sending His Son and paying the ultimate and infinite price for our sins that we might be forever His and spend eternity with Him. Such longing for holiness makes us "press on" to put to death the sinful pull of our fallen nature and to be strengthened more and more to be obedient in all aspects of our lives.

...so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Messiah Yeshua. – Here, once again, we see Paul inspired words affirming the sovereignty of God in bestowing His grace upon all those who are His. The very words of Paul in this final phrase of our verse makes it clear that we did not initially "lay hold" of Him but He "laid hold" of us. The Greek word used here is *καταλαμβάνω* (*katalambanō*) which means in this context "to gain control of someone through pursuit, catch up with, to seize."²

This gives a beautiful picture or metaphor of God's love in bringing those He has chosen to Himself. He first "laid hold of the one He intended to save," granting the gift of faith, and in so doing enabled the believer to lay hold of His power and promises, through the enabling of the Ruach HaKodesh, thus forging an eternal relationship with the Creator Himself.

1 Garland, *Expositor's Bible Commentary (revised)*, p. 245.

2 BDAG, "καταλαμβάνω," p. 520.

To “lay hold” in this context gives the picture of ownership. Even as God, from eternity past (cf. Eph 1:3–6), took all whom He would save to be His chosen sons and daughters, so that in the life of each believer, there would be both the desire and the on-going ability to “lay hold” of God. This results in the ability to trust Him and to gain from Him the spiritual strength to persevere and to become more and more victorious over the sinful nature. In so doing, those who are truly His grow both in their desire and ability to please Him in all things and thus to give Him the glory He so much deserves.

Thus Paul wrote to the Colossians:

For this reason also, since the day we heard [of it], we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. (Col 1:9–12)

13–14 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Messiah Yeshua.

The first thing Paul emphasizes, having exhorted his readers to follow his example of “pressing on” in the spiritual “race” of becoming more and more like Yeshua, is the essential equality of all who have come to faith in Yeshua. Note how he begins this verse by referring to his readers at Philippi as “brethren” (ἀδελφοί, *adelphoi*), a Greek word that means “brothers” but which could also carry the meaning of “brothers and sisters” or to describe a group of people (both male and female) who have a close association.¹ In referring to the community at Philippi as “brethren,” he includes himself with them as equals in the sense that all who are in Messiah Yeshua have been equally purchased by His death and resurrection, given the indwelling Ruach, and the unchanging promise of eternity with Him.

Paul goes on to describe his own status in “running the race,” name-

1 See *BDAG*, “ἀδελφός,” p. 18.

ly, that he has not “laid hold of it yet.” Clearly that to which he refers is the “final victory crown” of having the sinful nature forever vanished and thereby being fully capable of living in complete holiness as a trophy of God’s final and ultimate salvation. In describing himself this way, he teaches not only the Philippian believers but us as well, that all true believers in Yeshua are “running the same race,” and therefore all must persevere and strive to do so with integrity, growing sanctification, and with our eyes upon the “finish line.”

It is not uncommon for people to look at leaders within the body of Messiah and think that they no longer feel the tug of the sinful flesh as does the “common” believer. But such a false perspective is clearly shown in our text to be wrong. For Paul, who encountered the very presence of the risen Messiah Yeshua, as he was on the Damascus Road (cf. Acts 9:1–9), may have been considered to be far more holy than the average believer.

But in our text he makes it clear that, like all “brethren,” he had not yet “laid hold of it.” First, it should be noted that the word “it” in the English translations is actually not present in the Greek itself. The wording Paul uses here relates, once again, to the metaphor of a footrace, something that was quite common in the ancient Greek world. To “lay hold” most surely means “to grasp the award at the end of the race” and therefore pictures the runner having completed “the race.” Clearly the point Paul is making is that as long as the Lord gives us life upon this earth, we are “in the race” with the goal of becoming more and more like Yeshua in all aspects of our lives. But another aspect is likewise emphasized, and it is this: that if we are to run the race as our Savior intends, then we will constantly have our eyes focused upon the finish line, and in doing so, this will urge us on to do our best in the race.

The application to our life of faith is obvious: we must utilize in every possible way the “means of grace,” which are primarily (1) the Scriptures, (2) prayer, and (3) the fellowship of believers together in the local assembly. The Scriptures are the specific revelation of God describing His person, His will, and delineating what honors Him and does not honor Him. Prayer is the communion of the believer with God Himself, empowered and led by the Ruach HaKodesh, the means by which the specific will of God is made known in regard to specific life decisions, as well calling upon God for strength and wisdom to live in a way that glorifies Him.

...but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead – Paul now gives us two essential aspects of growing in our ability to honor the Lord by living lives of righteousness in this

fallen world, and he does so by describing what he himself practices as essential aspects of a life of faith.

First, he forgets what lies behind. To understand Paul's words here, we must be reminded that the verb "to forget" (*shakach* שָׁכַח) in the Hebrew mindset could carry the sense of "to neglect" or "disregard" a covenant of which one was a member. Note, for instance, Jer 18:15-16.

For My people have forgotten Me, they burn incense to worthless gods and they have stumbled from their ways, from the ancient paths, to walk in bypaths, not on a highway, to make their land a desolation, an object of perpetual hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and shake his head. (Jer 18:15–16)

Thus, Paul is not saying that he was even able to "erase from his memory" his former life, for he even recounts it in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1Cor 15:9)

What he means in our text is that he no longer allows the past to drag him down in his life of faith in Yeshua. Or to put it another way, in "forgetting the past," he is stating that he no longer has any "covenant obligations" in regard to his former life. The penalty has been paid by Yeshua and the note of debt has been entirely abolished, never again to be brought up as needing to be paid.

...and reaching forward to what lies ahead – But how is it possible for a born-again believer in Yeshua to "forget the past" in this way? It is possible as we more and more focus our attention on what God has done for us in Yeshua and to lay hold of the promise of God's sure and eternal forgiveness. Surely the enemy will seek to use our past lives of sin to drag us down and diminish our ability to grow in our walk with the Lord. But this is the battle we are in, and as we take up the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God," we are enabled more and more to put our failures behind us and to grow in our ability, by the strength of the Spirit, to "reach forward to what lies ahead," i.e., to serve the Lord by serving each other and to shine as lights for the gospel of Yeshua in this dark world.

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Messiah Yeshua. – Paul continues to utilize the metaphor of the runner in a footrace, to "press on toward the goal" (κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω). Literally the

Greek has “according to the goal I pursue,” putting the emphasis upon “the goal.” What is the goal that Paul has in mind? Ultimately it surely is to hear the words of Yeshua, “well done, good and faithful servant” (cf. Matt. 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17).

This is the “prize of the upward call of God in Messiah Yeshua” which Paul describes in 1Cor 9:25.

Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then [do it] to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1Cor 9:25)

How easy it is to become distracted by all of the negative aspects of the world in which we live. And therefore how important it is that we regularly focus our minds and thoughts upon the race in which we are engaged, and the glorious prize that lays before us, even to be fully accepted by our risen and reigning Savior, and to dwell forever in the eternal joy and majesty where all sin and sorrow have been forever abolished and joy and happiness find their full abundance in giving glory to the One Who has redeemed us.

Such an uplifting aspect of our faith is enhanced and strengthened by fellowshiping together with other believers, and this is undoubtedly why the author of Hebrews wrote these inspired words:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging [one another]; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Heb 10:23–25)