

Philippians 3:12-16

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Living out the servant mindset of Jesus is an ongoing process. It is something believers should seek to do for the rest of their lives, daily pressing on toward God's calling for us to have the attitude of Jesus, who lived out faithful obedience to God to the point of death, and was rewarded for it by God.

Paul's desire to be a faithful witness who is obedient even to death is bolstered by his statement, *Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect.* The word translated *perfect* is "teleioo" which carries the idea of completion, either of a task being finished, a work being completed, or an era coming to an end. Paul is saying "Jesus is still working in my life." So this would seem to indicate that Paul is connecting the *prize of the upward call* he is striving to attain together with the "exanastasis"/resurrection from the dead he is seeking to *lay hold of* (verse 11) through his determination to *press on* in living a life of radical obedience to God, even to death as a martyr for Christ.

Paul recognizes that he needs to endure to the end in order to attain this reward, which is why he says *not that I have already obtained.* Paul has already endured incredible suffering. He has been amazingly faithful. However, he has not yet endured to the end. Therefore Paul continues to strive. Paul might have in mind a principle from the Old Testament found in Ezekiel 18:24, that if a righteous man turns from his righteousness, and does evil, it wipes out the positive impact of the good deeds he did before.

This Ezekiel passage makes clear the importance of enduring until the end in order to receive a full reward. Paul states this principle to his disciple and successor Timothy just as he is about to die, during his second imprisonment in Rome. There he states that if we endure in faithfulness to the end of our lives we will gain the reward of reigning, but if we do not endure in living faithfully, we will be denied the reward of reigning with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12).

In 2 Timothy, Paul states that he has in fact finished the race. He has in fact attained. He says that a crown of righteousness is laid up for him (2 Timothy 4:8). The difference is between 2 Timothy and Philippians seems to be that in this letter to the Philippians, Paul expects to be released from jail, so expects he has more time in which he needs to be faithful. However, in 2 Timothy he expects to die, soon. His life is all but over. Therefore he has "attained."

Paul desires to become a martyr himself. He addressed a willingness, even eagerness to die in Chapter 1 (Philippians 1: 23). Perhaps that is what he is signaling by using "exanastasis" from the dead, rather than simply "anastasis" from the dead (verse 11), as in all other instances in scripture referring to bodily resurrection. Dying as a martyr requires radical obedience, and is in fact something that can be laid hold of through faithful obedience.

It is worth noting that the English word "martyr" is derived from Greek. In the book of Revelation, the word "martyria" occurs a number of times, and is most often translated "witness"

or “testimony.” To adopt the mindset of Paul requires setting aside *all things* that stand in the way of radical obedience to Christ, in order to be a faithful witness (“martyria”) and live with a consistent testimony (“martyria”) for Jesus. It is this laying down of our lives that leads to the greatest reward that can possibly be gained from this life. We do have to lay our lives down, and take up our cross daily in order to gain the greatest of rewards and know Christ by faith (Luke 9:23). But we do not necessarily have to die physically in order to be a faithful “martyria.” However, it seems Paul expects that to be his calling.

Such a setting aside of “self” to be a faithful witness can be done through service and sacrifice, and does not necessarily require dying physically. However, Paul expected to actually die as a martyr for Christ. He had adopted a mindset that dying for Christ represented a level of faithfulness he wished to attain. It could be that he was speaking of gaining the resurrection status of a martyr, and in this way *lay hold* of the great *prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*.

This is consistent with other passages of scripture, such as:

“Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.”
(Revelation 12:10-11)

It is clear in this passage from Revelation that those who died as martyrs did so because they counted their lives as less valuable than obeying Jesus. It is also clear that their witness (“martyria”) is an integral part of throwing down Satan (the accuser). Further, this obedience is an integral part of having ushered in the kingdom of God on earth.

Paul notes that he is attempting to *lay hold* of the great *prize of the upward call*, because it was for this purpose that Paul *was laid hold of by Christ Jesus*. We can consider that Jesus *laid hold* of Paul through appearing to him on the road to Damascus, and jolting him into recognizing Him as Lord. Jesus then appointed Paul as a minister to the Gentiles. When Jesus *laid hold* of Paul, He took a specific action that had a specific purpose. In like manner, Paul is striving with all his might to achieve the specific purpose appointed unto him by Christ. In doing so, Paul is adopting the same “attitude” or mindset that Jesus adopted, trusting the benevolence of God. Paul believes that walking in obedience to Jesus’ commands is always for our ultimate best (as described in Philippians 2:5-10).

Paul considers his life’s journey as a work in progress. He states *Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet*. Again here Paul is speaking of the great reward he seeks, to know Christ, and to be exalted by God for faithful obedience. Paul then states that he is looking forward rather than backward. Paul learns from the past, but is not a slave to the past. He states *but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*.

Paul has made mistakes. He calls himself the “foremost” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul has also done great things, but does not rest on his past accomplishments. Paul does not live in the past. He is *forgetting what lies behind*. We can learn from the past, but we cannot change the past. Wisely, Paul lives in the present. Each day, He presses *on toward the goal for the prize*. Paul’s current actions are informed by the past, but rooted in the present. All he does in the present he does as an investment in hope of a future benefit. He is constantly acting now, but *reaching forward to what lies ahead*. He does not expect comfort. He says *I press on toward the goal for the prize*. The phrase *press on* pictures strenuous effort. From what we know of Paul, his life certainly illustrated strenuous effort (2 Corinthians 6:4-5).

Paul admonishes us to adopt the attitude Jesus chose. Paul has provided an example of what that looked like in his own life. This is, again, completely consistent with the attitude Paul exhorted the Philippian believers to adopt in the previous chapter (2:5-10). This section could be viewed as Paul’s personal testimony as to how he has applied adopting the attitude (“phreneo”) of Jesus in his own life.

Paul now shifts from personal testimony to return to making an admonition. He states: *Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude*. This *attitude* is the same *attitude* he just described, one he has chosen to have, which is the same *attitude* Paul described Jesus as having in the last chapter (Philippians 2:5). The *attitude* of Jesus to radically obey the Father in all things is the *attitude* Paul admonishes believers to choose.

The Greek word “phreneo” occurs ten times in Philippians. It is translated here as *attitude*, in the phrase *have this attitude*, as also in Philippians 1:7, 2:2, and 2:5. It means to choose a mindset. The fact that “phreneo” is found ten times in this short letter indicates that a central theme of Philippians is that believers should choose the same mindset that Jesus chose, a mindset that radical obedience to God is the path to our own enlightened self-interest.

Paul admonishes that this *attitude* of seeking a future prize through radical obedience to Christ means we set aside all things to serve Christ, including our lives. Paul urges that this *attitude* should be chosen by *as many as are perfect*. The root of the word translated *perfect* is the Greek word “teleios,” which is also translated as “mature” or “complete.” “Mature” is probably a better idea here. If someone was already “perfect” in the sense of not needing anything further, it would seem they would not need Paul’s admonishment to continue to strive toward the *prize*.

Paul likely here is saying something like “If anyone is mature enough to understand the wisdom of what life is really about, then that person should adopt this attitude of setting aside anything and everything in order to gain the great prize of life that comes from radical obedience to Christ.” The introductory clause *Let us therefore*, is qualified by *as many as are perfect*. The “us” refers to Paul and all the believers being addressed. But the admonition only applies to those who are sufficiently mature (*perfect*) to be capable of having the wisdom to *have this attitude* (“phreneo”) that setting aside all things in this life to follow Christ is actually the path to our greatest benefit.

Paul then addresses those who might not have the maturity to recognize the great benefit of relinquishing everything in this life, saying *and if in anything you have a different attitude, God*

will reveal that also to you. It seems that some might not be mature enough to comprehend that losing everything for the sake of Christ is actually gaining everything. Jesus stated this principle often, and His apostles did not understand it until after He resurrected from the dead (Mark 8:35; 9:35; Matthew 10:39; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 10:17; 12:25; 15:13). They weren't mature enough to get it.

Even though this concept is found throughout the Bible, it is still difficult to grasp. It is not initially intuitive that the best way to gain our lives is to lay them down. So Paul is confident that, in time, God will *reveal* to these brethren the wisdom of adopting this attitude. This principle would apply to any believer. God will work in the life of any believer and reveal the truth to them, if they are willing to hear.

It is worth noting that the great biblical example of faith, Abraham, only obeyed partially for fifteen plus years. God called Abraham while he lived in Ur, and told him to leave his home and family and come to Canaan, where he would gain a great reward for his obedience (Acts 7:2-3). Abraham obeyed partially, leaving his home, but not his family. Then he got halfway to Canaan and stopped in Haran for fourteen years. Then God called Abraham again, to leave his home in Haran as well as his family (Genesis 12:1-3). This time Abraham left most of his family, but took along his nephew Lot. In each case, Abraham obeyed in part. Finally when Abraham separated from Lot, and had finally obeyed fully, God granted him the promised reward of the land:

“The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever.”
(Genesis 13:14-15)

Note that the Bible specifies that the promised reward was granted “after Lot had separated,” and therefore Abraham had finally fully obeyed God’s command to “leave your home and your family.” It is comforting that one of the Bible’s prime examples of faith (Abraham) took so many years to come to full obedience. God begins a *great work* in us when we come to faith in Jesus and receive a new birth by His Spirit. But then He continues to work within us, to conform us to His image. When we walk in faith, we are conformed to His image in this life, and receive rewards beyond what we can even comprehend (1 Corinthians 2:9). This might be viewed as an example of what Paul has in mind in saying *if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you.*

Paul now shifts from speaking to those without the wisdom to understand the great benefit to be gained from laying aside all of what is usually thought of as “great” in this life, in order to gain something infinitely better, and now speaks again to those whom he deems as mature, stating, *however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.* This phrase can also be translated “Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule.” The idea seems to be, “No matter how far you have come, just keep moving forward, following this fundamental principle.”

Some translations add the idea of “being of the same mind.” Life is a team sport, that is “played” in the present. The “game” does not end until it is over. And that does not occur until our life ends, or the day of Christ occurs.

The challenge of life is to continue to live life in such a way as to recognize eternal realities, and set aside anything that stands in the way of complete, radical obedience to Christ. The word translated *standard* in the phrase *let us keep living by that same standard* refers to the phrase *have this attitude* in verse 15. And the *attitude* that is described in the prior verses is the attitude of setting aside all things of the world and this present earth in order to *press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus* (verse 14).

The word translated *attitude* is “phreneo” which is found ten times in this brief letter, and is the theme of the book. Paul set forth the mindset we should adopt in Philippians 2:5-10, which is the same mindset Jesus adopted. Paul’s overriding message to his Philippian *brethren* is to urge them to make a deliberate choice to adopt the same mindset Jesus had when He set aside the comfort of heaven to pursue the will of God, and received a great reward for His obedience.

Biblical Text

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 Christ Jesus. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; ¹⁶ however, let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained.