

Enduring Tests that Lead to Receiving Crowns

INTRODUCTION

Tonight I want to continue on the same theme I was on last Sunday, when James said, “Blessed is the man”—blessed is the woman, the person—“who endures temptation” (Js. 1:12).

We’ll look at this verse on the PowerPoint in a few minutes. “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

“WE MUST ALL STAND BEFORE THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST”

Paragraph 1. All believers stand before the judgment seat of Christ. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Every single believer in all of history is going to stand before Jesus as a judge—as a good judge, as a kind judge.

The phrase *judgment seat* is the Greek word *bema*, the *bema* seat, which is the place where the judges in the Olympic games gave the trophies, or medals in our contemporary context. So it’s an award; it’s the position where the awards are given out—the *bema* seat, the judgment seat.

So there’s a kind judge, a happy judge, who’s evaluating our life on the earth. He is giving us an assignment in the age to come, based upon our faithfulness to Him in this age.

WE WILL STAND AND WATCH THE TRUTH UNFOLD

It says in 1 Corinthians 4:5, continuing on the same theme, “The Lord [will] come... who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and reveal the counsels”—or the motives—“of the heart”—of each person’s heart.

“THEN EACH ONE’S PRAISE WILL COME FROM GOD”

Then it gives a surprising statement: After the Lord reveals the hidden things of darkness, as He reveals the hidden motives of your heart, He’s going to give praise to every single believer. “Then each one’s praise will come from God” (1 Cor. 4:5).

You think, “Now what praise?” It says the hidden things of the heart. Well, the hidden things of our hearts aren’t only the wicked things that we’re repenting of, that are in our hearts. The hidden things and the secret counsels are also our secret longings for righteousness and our secret humility and servant-hood that we didn’t do in the sight of men.

It’s the plan of your heart that you really, really want to go all the way for God. God sees this in your spirit. Though God wants us to have more than longing, the longings do count. He wants us to put action to that longing, but the longings are real when He sees them.

It says in Matthew 6 that our private giving is not to be done for attention (Mt. 6:1-4). Our serving is not to be done for recognition. Our prayer is not done for attention. God sees all the secret things that we have done. He gives praise to every single believer.

AFFIRMATION FROM JESUS

Some believers will receive significantly more praise than others. Every believer will have an affirmation on that day. Some will receive a significant, huge affirmation from the Lord Himself.

Imagine standing before Jesus. There you are, locked eye to eye. He looks at your life and He says more than just “Well done,” but He affirms and praises you for the way that you carried your heart on the earth in the midst of difficulty and temptation and obstacles. He looks at you and He says, “I saw that. I saw that movement of your heart.”

He gives affirmation. You can put *affirmation* in the place of the word *praise*.

HE REMEMBERS THE WORKS OF OUR HANDS

Paragraph B. God esteems and remembers and rewards the works of our hands. He rewards and remembers what our hands have done.

The truth is that we mostly do only small, little things our entire life. If He only evaluated and remembered the big things, we might say, “Lord, which one? Are You going to remember both of them?” We do so few big things.

Our lives, by the will of God, are filled with little things, but they’re meaningful to God and He watches—the attitudes of our heart, our words, the way we serve, the way we give, even in the little that we have to give. God sees them.

This remembrance of God over our lives, even in the hidden, secret things, the very fact that He remembers them gives dignity to every hour of every day of your life.

He sees our war with temptation: He sees that we bridle our tongue when we want to say the wrong thing; that we give our money when our flesh wants to keep it; that we give our time when our flesh wants to draw back and just pamper ourselves. We serve others and we do it without recognition.

The Lord sees all of these things. Because He remembers these acts and rewards them, it gives dignity to the most mundane and routine day. Every single hour of our day has potential eternal significance, because He remembers it and He cares about it. This is a fantastic doctrine.

“ONE STAR DIFFERS FROM ANOTHER IN GLORY”

Paragraph C. In our resurrected bodies, we will all have different spiritual capacities. We will all have different abilities in the resurrection.

I use this verse so much, but for those of you who are new, I want to read this to you. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:41, “There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:41-42).

In the same way that the hundred billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy all differ in glory, in power, in brightness, in luster, the constitution of what is at their core and in the perimeter around them, every star differs dramatically from the star next to it in glory. All hundred billion differ from one another.

Then there are a hundred million galaxies, of which the Milky Way is only one. Think of how vast the stars are! The Lord says, “Every one of them has a different dimension of glory and luster and power about them. So also is the resurrection of the dead.”

PHYSICAL, MATERIAL BODIES ON THE EARTH, FOREVER

I like to say this over and over. Even those of us who know it, our paradigm is stuck in wrong thinking. We’re not floating away to a cloud somewhere to play a harp for a billion years. We’re going to be on the earth. At the second coming, Jesus brings heaven to the earth. The prayer, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10, KJV) is going to be answered in the most literal, complete, global way.

We’re going to have physical, material bodies. Our bodies will be physical. They will have all the qualities of the supernatural life of the resurrection, but they will have the dimensions of material and physical dimensions to our body.

We will rule and reign on a physical earth, with the supernatural power of God, with supernatural bodies that are physical. We will eat, we will talk to one another, we will teach one another. We will remember the past, we will make new relationships. We will have joy, we will have laughter, we will have ministries. We will have assignments! Everything that we’re doing now in the broad, principle categories of our lives, working and playing and having relationships, and eating and learning and remembering—all those dimensions will continue forever on the earth in our resurrected physical bodies.

“OF THE INCREASE OF HIS GOVERNMENT THERE SHALL BE NO END”

It’s going to get far better than it is now. We’re not floating away as a spirit being, hanging up in the nebula somewhere, apologizing to the Lord. “We’ve worshipped you for a million years! Is it possible we could do one little thing besides this? No, Lord, don’t take it the wrong way! We do love You, it’s not about that...”

Well, the Lord didn’t plan it that way. If you like your life on the earth now, even with all the difficulty, you’re going to be on the earth forever with a physical body, with a ministry, with an assignment, with real work to do; with real work that really matters.

God's entire empire on the earth and wherever else He extends it, is going to go on for billions and billions and billions of years. He's going to have a vast infrastructure in His empire with every level of responsibility and training and mobilization of people, relating and raising up and all different dimensions of ministry, just like now, but much more powerfully.

Whatever ministry you have now, you have the potential to have a far more powerful ministry in the age to come. I'm talking about the crown of life, because the Lord promises a crown of life to every single believer who is faithful to endure temptation.

NOT EVERYONE WILL HAVE A CROWN

Now, of the two or three billion believers—that's my estimate—who will be with the Lord at the time of the second coming, including the great revival that's coming in the future, I don't believe that all believers will have a crown.

I believe that millions will, but I believe that billions will not. These crowns are only given to those whom the Lord personally approves to get a crown.

They're crowns of authority, but they're called crowns of life, because they refer to our capacity to experience life in the glory of God, and our capacity to minister it or impart it to other people.

Some of you will have a huge capacity to experience and a huge capacity to minister to God, to the saints, and to the angels. Others of you will start off with a much smaller capacity. That capacity isn't related to how famous or successful your ministry was. It doesn't matter what your gifting was, or if anyone ever heard of you. It has nothing to do with that. It has only to do with heart responses in this age to the Lord—the secret heart responses.

Scripture makes it clear that in that day, many of the well-known and high profile people will be of the lesser degrees of responsibility in the age to come. Many of the people with very little profile will have a huge responsibility. The Lord is only measuring by one thing—the response of the heart.

If you want to know the specifics, read the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "This is what I'm measuring your life by."

THE LORD WILL ONLY GIVE A CROWN TO THOSE WHO ARE APPROVED

Paragraph D. God will only give the crown of life to believers who are approved.

Now, this is a strange word; for many believers it's the word *worthy*. We have this idea, a true idea, that we are not worthy of salvation. It's given as a gift; that's absolutely true. Salvation is given to us as a gift. That is the huge foundation of eternal life, that we can receive the gift of righteousness as a free gift. No one, absolutely no one can earn it.

After that is established, then the Lord begins to employ the principle of being worthy. Not earning it, that's not the idea. We could never earn His kindness or His goodness. He talks about people who are worthy, who are responsive to Him in the greater degrees.

Only those who are worthy; only those who are approved. Jesus uses the word *worthy* a number of times. So do the apostles.

It disturbs our sensibilities. We think, "This worthy thing, surely Jesus had His doctrine right, and surely the apostles had their doctrine right." We know we cannot be worthy. They're not talking about earning salvation, they're talking about being responsive in a way that is worthy of receiving a crown of authority in the age to come.

Some of you might say, "I don't want that crown of authority." I think you do.

PERSONAL MEETINGS WITH JESUS

Jesus spoke on several occasions about thrones and crowns. In one sense, it refers to the proximity, the nearness of serving with the Lord in the things that are near and dear to God's heart. You want to be in that staff meeting, if you will, with the Lord, discussing the dearest things on His heart that He's giving you responsibility to execute under His authority.

You want to report back to Him on it; you don't want to report back to one of the guys who's reporting to Him. You want to report directly to Him.

There will be an infrastructure all over His empire, just like there is now in the earth; like there is now in the angelic realm of heaven. Right now the infrastructure is there, and it is going to continue forever.

I want to be in meetings where I'm looking eye to eye with this Man, Jesus, who is fully God and fully Man. I want to say, "Hey, I want to talk to You about what You assigned me to do."

Three billion people aren't going to be talking to Jesus in personal conversations every day, all day. Now, I know that messes up some people's thinking, because they confuse the ministry of the Holy Spirit that will be in all of us. We will be able to talk to God and feel His presence and have Him communicate directly back at us.

With three billion people, there will be times where various ones will have personal meetings with the one Man, Christ Jesus. I mean, He will be ruling as a man in a physical body. I mean, He'll get around really well; He can come and go and walk through walls, but He will still be a human forever.

After He became a man, He will be human forever. As a human, He will interact with people, like He did with the twelve apostles. Others were longing to meet with Him, and they had to wait for another time and another place. They had those personal sit-down meetings.

I want to live in a way where I'm as close to Him in the things that are dear to Him. He says, "If you live with all of your heart towards Me right now, you will be worthy of those assignments." It's called the crown of life.

TEMPTATION MUST BE ENDURED

It says here in James 1, "Blessed is the man who endures temptation" (Js. 1:12). We've gone over this several times in the last couple of weeks. Temptation must be endured.

What does it mean to endure it? Temptation assaults us; temptation says, "Follow me, follow me!" We say "no" and we resist it, and it takes endurance because temptation is unrelenting. Don't think of temptation only as physical temptations like immorality or eating or drinking, or those kinds of things. Temptations involve pride in our spirit and covetousness in our finances; slothfulness in the use of our time and servant-hood, and arrogance and slander.

All of those are various lusts and temptations that come. They're not only the physical appetites that all of us are familiar with.

James says, "The man or woman that endures, that continues to say 'no' to this never-renting push and pursuit of temptation to overtake us"—he's not talking about sinless perfection. The most faithful in history will have had many times where they didn't follow through in the deepest places of their lives. When we meet Paul, Peter, James and John; David and Moses; if the story ever came out, we would find out that they're exactly like you and me. Exactly.

So, through the Lord's editing process of grace, His standard of what He calls "faithful" is doable for everyone. He wants us to go after this thing hard.

THE PERVASIVE MEDIOCRITY OF WESTERN CULTURE

Now, the problem that most of us as Western Christians face is that the Western culture is hostile to radical, New Testament Christianity. I mean the Western culture in the Church. The church screams out, "Don't go so hard! Grace, grace! Go slower, give less, take more time for yourself. Exert yourself, be less humble, take care of you."

The "grace doctrine" that permeates the Western church is significantly opposite of the grace doctrine that the apostles taught.

So, even the most on-fire guy or gal in America—I mean, we're really on-fire compared to most Americans. The Lord isn't comparing us to most Americans; the *us* is just a hypothetical *us* that I'm talking about. He's not comparing the most on-fire group of people to other Americans; He's comparing us to the Word of God and the saints throughout history.

I don't want to be more on-fire than an American on the other side of town; that's not what I'm interested in. I'm interested in living in reality before the gaze of God. The Lord says that He will approve the people who get the crowns of life.

THREE DIFFERENT NAMES FOR THE CROWN

Paragraph E. Again, I mentioned this already a couple of times, there are three different names for the crown of life. It's called the "crown of life" here, and it's called the "crown of righteousness" or the "crown of glory." I believe they're all three the same thing. I don't want to get into why I believe it; the life of God and the anointing of God and the glory of God are all the same reality. They all flow in righteousness.

THE ROYAL DIADEM

Paragraph F. There are two different Greek words describing the two different types of crowns in the New Testament. One is the crown of a ruler, the diadem. When a king received a diadem, normally it was by an inheritance or an appointment. He didn't earn it; he was the king because his father was the king before him.

Or the diadem of a public official—more often than not, they bought their assignment. More often than not, they paid money or bargained and made an agreement and got their diadem.

THE CROWN OF AN ATHLETE

There's another type of word for crowns in the New Testament, *stefanos*. The *stefanos* crown is the crown of an athlete. It's the gold medal of today. In the ancient world, in the Olympic games, they would get the *stefanos* crown.

The marathon runner practiced long hours and was the champion of the nation. They received the crown—the crown of the athlete is what it's talking about.

Jesus is talking in Revelation 2:10, and He says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10, paraphrased).

It's not the inherited diadem that a father passed on to his son in the hierarchy of an empire. This is the crown that you have because of the way you've prepared. He says, "If you are faithful till the end, not for a five-year season of your life, if you're faithful until the end of your life"—it says later on in Revelation 2, when Jesus is still speaking, "If you overcome till the end, I will give you power" (Rev. 2:26, paraphrased).

"HOLD FAST WHAT YOU HAVE, THAT NO MAN TAKE YOUR CROWN"

This is the crown, or the thrones. Jesus is still speaking in chapter 3. Look at this; chapter 3 is really sobering. "Hold fast what you have" (Rev. 3:11)—in other words, the ground that you've taken with your life, the breakthrough in humility, in freshness with God, in the realms of obedience that you're walking in, He says, "Hold fast to what you have, that no one may take your crown."

Beloved, you understand, you could walk in a dimension of faithfulness in your time, in your money, in your speech, in your physical appetites today. But a year or two from now, you aren't walking in that same dimension. You've diminished your walk with the Lord; you're walking in a lesser degree of commitment and obedience under His Lordship.

I've watched this through many years of ministry; I've seen many people go hard for a five-year spurt. The Lord is their everything! Then, for the next five or ten years, they live in the memory of when it was true.

Normally it takes people five or ten years before they wake up and realize that they aren't living like they used to. It's been one of my real challenges as a pastor to get people not to live in the memory of their dedication at seven and eight years old.

Jesus told them to hold fast. "Hold fast the areas of dedication that you've broken through in, and make sure that no one takes your crown." Someone cannot steal your crown and run away to some other part of heaven; that's not what He's talking about. "Oh no, Stuart, get back here and give me my crown!" That's not what we're talking about. He will have plenty of crowns; he will not need mine anyway.

BEWARE THE CASE FOR PASSIVE CHRISTIANITY

That is not what He's talking about. He says, "Don't let anyone take it. Don't let another person persuade you to live in a way to where you lose your crown."

This is so present in the Body of Christ. There are so many people making a case for passive Christianity, calling it the grace of God. People are buying into it because it sounds appealing to their flesh. When you give your heart and mind to that kind of reasoning, because it's not biblical, even though they're using Bible verses, that person has taken your crown.

They've led you into a condition in your relationship with the Lord, not to where you've lost your salvation, but you've lost your crown.

He says, "Make sure whoever is talking to you, whomever your fellowship is with, whoever you're buying into, that it's motivating you in the right direction; that it's not going to lead you into a lifestyle where you lose your crown." He says, "Hold fast to the areas of dedication."

I mean, we spend a lot of time here, encouraging people to pray, to fast, to read the Word, to serve, to walk in holiness, to live in meekness. People will be around for a year or two—we don't do it that great, but I mean, we put a lot of energy into it. I've watched this over the seven years of IHOP-KC; they'll go back home and a year later I'll say, "Hey, how are you doing?"

"Well, our church isn't really into it so much. What they said really isn't that big of a deal. It's not the right time or season."

I said, "That guy just stole your crown."

I said, "You bought into that logic; you know better than that. You don't take a man's word, it's the Word of God that you believe."

“Hold fast, lest you give yourself to that persuasion and lose your crown.” That’s what He’s talking about.

WE ARE MADE COMPLETE

Top of page two. We are made complete.

There are many verses in the New Testament—I’m thinking, off the top of my head, of ten or twelve of them; I don’t have them all listed here—where Jesus or one of the apostles is exhorting the people to be complete, or they might use the word *perfect*, or *mature*.

It’s not talking about being complete in Christ. We are complete in Christ in the sense that, because He paid the price, we have our full access to God; we have our full entry into heaven.

We are complete in that regard. He paid the price; no one can add a thing to it. Our access to God’s heart, into the eternal city, is paid for and it is certain.

Yes, we are made complete in Christ. That is a true doctrine, but that’s not what He’s talking about. Paul and the others exhorted the saints, who were already complete in Christ. They prayed and exhorted them yet to become complete.

Now, how, if you are complete in Christ, do you still need to become complete? They’re not talking about complete in terms of our legal position. We are complete: Jesus paid the price, and we are assured of that relationship with the Lord.

We’re talking about being made complete in our heart responses to the Lord.

“LET ENDURANCE HAVE ITS PERFECT WORK”

It says here in James 1, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing”—or the working—“of your faith produces patience” (Js. 1:2-3).

I like the other translation that says, *endurance*. Many say that word *endurance*; patience in the New Testament most often means *endurance*, depending on what translation you have.

“Let endurance have its perfect work” (Js. 1:4).

There it is! Endurance works in your soul. Endurance does a work for you; endurance does a work in you.

Here’s what it does: It causes you to be perfect and complete in your obedience. That’s what it’s talking about.

You are already complete in Christ (Col. 2:10). That is your legal position before Christ. The day you are born again, you are complete in Christ.

It isn't talking about your legal position; it's talking about your living condition. It's talking about becoming complete in your obedience, lacking nothing in your obedience.

THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF YOUR LIFE

Now, one of the things I wanted to get clear is this: Moses said we have seventy years on the earth; eighty due to strength (Psalm 90:10) So, let's say your seventy years on the earth; some have a lot less, and some a lot more, but your seventy years on the earth as a believer.

You have one primary objective with many subunits to it. That is, to end your life complete; to where your obedience is complete in every area of your life.

You have seventy years; if you get saved late, you have less time. It's not going to affect your entrance into heaven, but it will affect your assignment in heaven.

I don't know if this is your goal; I don't know if you think this way, but it is something you want to think about. As a shepherd I'm helping you, if this is a new idea. I'm giving you really good information that will change your entire eternal destiny if you buy into it.

ARE YOU UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS?

“When you stand before the Lord,” James says, “here's what you want to do.” You're not complete in Christ at the judgment seat of Christ; you're complete in Christ the day you're born again. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about being complete in your obedience.

Is your money under the Lordship of Jesus, for real? I don't mean faking people out and faking yourself out—“Is it really? I don't know, I'll think about it!” You want to think about that; it's a biggie. Your time: Your time is not your own. Your time belongs to another man, a man who is fully God, who died for you. Your time is His.

“Well, I need time for myself...”

Well, He wants you to have time to rest; that's typically what people mean. Your time belongs to Him; it doesn't belong to you, even. He's going to talk to you about your time.

Does your time come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in reality? Your speech, your physical passions and appetites, your eyes, the covenant with your eyes to refuse to gaze on things that are impure, all those areas—our eyes, our speech, our time, our money, our physical appetites; there are several others. The goal of our life on the earth is to have our obedience complete.

TO PRESENT YOU COMPLETE IN CHRIST

There's a verse I don't have here, Colossians 1:27-29. Paul said, “Here is my whole goal, to present you complete” (Col. 1:28, paraphrased). He didn't mean to make them complete in Christ. They were complete in Christ the minute they were born again.

That is instantaneous; it is completely done. He says, “My goal as a shepherd is to teach you in such a way that you respond in such a way that, when your life is over, you offer every area of your life as under the Lordship of Jesus. Your life was complete in obedience.”

What James is saying here (Js. 1:12), only a couple of verses later, is the same theme. When he talks about receiving the crown of life, he’s actually talking about receiving the crown of life, right here in verses 2, 3, and 4; when he talks about trials, he says, “You need trials. You need the pressure of trials. Trials produce endurance. Endurance helps you to become complete in every area of your obedience.

“When you are complete in your obedience, then you are blessed, because you get the crown of life.”

THE PUSH TOWARDS WHOLEHEARTED OBEDIENCE

I want to say again, the crown of life is not synonymous with salvation. My opinion is that the majority of the saints don’t get the crown of life. Millions do, but billions do not. It’s based on one issue: Is your obedience complete?

It doesn’t mean sinless perfection; it doesn’t mean that you never fail. It means that in every area you have studied and scrutinized under the light of the Scriptures, not the opinions of the church in our nation.

I tell you, the opinions of the church of our nation will talk you out of obedience at every point. They are really affirming their own lack of obedience. There are so many pulpits in the land that are affirming their own spiritual passivity and teaching it as normative. It’s a lie, it’s not the truth.

So, I want to take every area, my time, my money, my words, my eyes, my appetites, every area—what I do, where I’m going, my serving, my lack of serving—every area. I want it to be complete. When I stand before the Lord and He says to all of us—I’m going to make it personal—“Mike, I’m giving you x amount of years to make every area complete. Here’s what I’m going to do: You can’t do it on your own; so, I’m going to allow some problems to come that thrust you into encountering Me in a greater way.”

SWEET ARE THE USES OF ADVERSITY

Problems aren’t the only things that help us, but they’re one of a number of things that help us in our journey. He says, “Problems come; they will produce endurance, which you cannot produce on your own without some pressure, just like the piece of coal cannot become a diamond without pressure.”

Coal needs pressure to become a diamond. Every one of us needs endurance. One of the components of endurance is pressure—trials. There are others as well: the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, other things. One of these days we’ll look at four or five of them really quickly.

“So, how can I get some pressure so I can get myself some endurance?”

Well, you don’t have to look for it. It says it right here: “Count it all joy when you fall into various temptations.” It will come your way.

Don’t pray for pressure, and don’t look for it. Don’t advertise it: “I really want to get more endurance, so would somebody please trouble me?!” You’ll have plenty of trouble.

Even the pressure that we’re supposed to resist, that comes from the kingdom of darkness, that we resist and renounce, even that creates the working of a muscle—the working of our faith. It’s like doing push-ups: incremental movements of exercising that muscle, day in and day out in our lives.

Endurance is produced, and endurance leads to all the areas of your life becoming complete in obedience.

Again, when the Lord says “complete and perfect,” *perfect* means *mature*. He’s not talking about sinless perfection, He’s talking in a way that’s humanly friendly through the grace of God. This is doable.

AN EXHORTATION TOWARDS COMPLETENESS

There are maybe ten verses in the New Testament exhorting the saints to be complete. Many believers don’t quite know what this is about. A lot of believers over the years, I’ve observed, their goal is to be happy and have a pretty cool ministry, if it works that way. They want to be happy and have some friends and have a pretty cool ministry if things land right. If they don’t, “Well, I tried...”

There’s a bigger vision for your life than being happy and having a cool ministry. It’s living in such a way that you end up complete at the end of your race, called your life on the earth. Some people get a thirty-year race, and some people get a ninety-year race.

You don’t know how long your race is going to be. But you can be sure of one thing: The Lord is asking us to be complete in our obedience. If we are, we get the crown that James is talking about in verse 12.

THE HIGH PRIZE OF THE UPWARD CALL

Paragraph H. Let’s go ahead to the passage—Philippians 3:10.

This is a dynamic passage. Paul is talking about receiving the crown. He calls it the prize. Look at verse 14, at the very bottom. “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14).

The upward call in Paul’s life is his heavenly call, and it’s his highest calling. It’s the upward one. It’s the one that is above and beyond the call that he’s operating in right then.

Now the context of Philippians is that Paul is in prison in Rome at the end of his life. He's written half of the New Testament already. He's planted churches, been in prison, all these things. He still hasn't operated in his upward call, which means his heavenly and his eternal and his highest call, that he was ordained by God to have for billions of years.

Here he is: He has a short amount of time; no one knows the exact amount of time. He's in prison in Rome, and he's at the end.

He says, "I'm going for it. I'm going for the prize of the upward call. I want the highest thing that God has ordained for my life in the age to come."

People are so focused on getting the most they can in this age; the biggest ministry and the most stuff in this age. Paul the apostle was focused on the prize.

BEARING THE FELLOWSHIP OF SUFFERING

OK, he's thinking of running the race. He's thinking of the athlete who runs the race and gets the prize. The prize is, he enters into the fullness of what God ordained for him because of his obedience responses on the earth.

Look at verse 10. He says, "That I might know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed to His death" (Phil. 3:10).

Now, look at verse 11. This is strange language unless you understand the things that I'm saying here. He says, "I want to be conformed to his death"—in other words, I want to bear the fellowship of suffering. Why? "If by any means I might attain to the resurrection of the dead" (Phil. 3:11).

ATTAINING THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

"Paul, what do you mean 'attain to the resurrection'?" You read commentaries that say Paul is uncertain about his salvation. I don't think he's talking about struggling with the assurance of salvation. He's not talking about, "... that I may attain to become born again."

Paul is at the end of his apostolic ministry; he's at the very end. He's talking about how he wants to attain to the highest dimensions that are possible to him in the resurrection in the age to come. He says, "I want to enter into the highest things that God has called me to in the resurrection"—which is billions and billions of years. "I have to know that I'm going to attain it."

Just so you know, Paul isn't talking about being born again, about the fact of being resurrected from the dead. That's not what he's talking about. He's talking about entering into the dimension of his calling that is in the resurrection.

He says, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected" (Phil. 3:12). He says, "I'm not mature," meaning, "My race is not over."

He says, “Until I die, I’m not at the finish line. I only attain when I’m at the finish line. Only then is it completely over. That’s the only way I can get the prize.”

You can be winning the race, and then, in the last mile of the marathon, a guy overtakes you and you lose the race. It’s not so much how you started; it’s how you end the race that Paul is talking about. He says, “I have not attained it yet. I’ve actually got to end in the same diligence and vigilance that I have now.”

LAYING HOLD OF THAT FOR WHICH JESUS LAID HOLD OF US

Paul says this: “I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me” (Phil. 3:12b). Did you know that Jesus laid hold of you? Meaning He got your attention, and you became saved. He laid hold of you, He arrested you, He got your attention, and you said “yes” to Him.

He laid hold of you. When He did, He had a plan in His mind for you that was far bigger than your seventy years on the earth.

The Lord’s plan for Paul was far bigger than his earthly ministry. He says, “I want to lay hold of the thing for which God laid hold of me. I want to enter into the thing for which I was called in the heart of God.”

“Paul, buddy, you wrote half the New Testament. I mean, you’re the main apostle! What’s the deal? What do you mean, you haven’t entered in?”

“No, I’m not talking about what I’m doing here. I’m talking about at the resurrection. I’ve got to know that I know that my obedience will be perfect”—or *complete* is what it means. “I want to know that I’ve endured temptation, and that I’m going to stand approved. I have to know that the prize is at the end of the race. I’m going to get it.”

“FORGETTING THOSE THINGS WHICH ARE BEHIND”

He says this in verse 13. “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended” (Phil. 3:13)—he says, “It’s not there yet.”

I don’t think he was doubting it. He says, “Until you’re at the end of the race, you’re not at the end of the race. Until I have finished my life, I have not finished it in complete obedience” (paraphrased).

He says, “But one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind” (Phil. 3:13b). Beloved, you forget the bad things, but you also forget your dedication. Some people are so remembering of their dedication and they always have a complaint in their heart. “Oh, I’ve been so dedicated! This is how you’ve treated me!”

Paul says, “The good and the bad, I just push ‘delete.’ I just leave it with the Lord. I’m not making an argument about how dedicated I was in the past. I forget that, and I’m not going to make an argument about how messed up I was in the past. I’m deleting the past. I’m going forward and whatever is important to the Lord, He will remember it.”

You don’t use your past dedication to complain against the Lord why He’s not treating you better. That’s what He’s talking about, forgetting the past. He says, “I’m going to reach forward to the things ahead of me.”

“The things ahead of you? Paul, you’re about to die!”

He’s talking about the things in the resurrection. He says it right here in one sentence: “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call” (Phil. 3:14).

HOW FAR DO YOUR GOALS EXTEND?

Here is my question: Do you have a goal for your life that is beyond this age?

Do you have a sober goal? Have you ever written it on paper? Have you ever talked about, what is your goal past your seventy years on the earth? Again, some are longer, some are shorter. Paul had a very clear goal: He had the goal of winning the prize.

He’s using the metaphor of the race. He uses it many times, this idea that he’s running the race and he’s going to win the prize.

Paul isn’t trying to beat another person. The prize in the kingdom isn’t beating another person; it’s beating our unfaithfulness. It’s beating temptation. That’s who we’re racing against—against slothfulness and compromise and temptation. All of that is temptation. We’re not racing against each other, we’re racing against temptation. That’s who we’re competing against.

In a word, lust is raging against our souls (1 Pet. 2:11).

“RUN IN A WAY THAT YOU RECEIVE THE PRIZE”

Let’s go to paragraph I. 1 Corinthians 9:24. Paul is going on with this idea.

He says, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?” (1 Cor. 9:24). See, this is the prize he was talking about a few minutes ago in Philippians. It’s not like one person receives the prize and all three billion of the rest of the saints don’t. Only one type, only one manner, only one lifestyle, only one manner of living receives the prize.

There are several different approaches to lifestyle in the kingdom. Only one lifestyle wins the prize. There’s only one way that wins, and it’s the way that runs to be mature and complete, lacking nothing in obedience. That’s the only way that wins the prize.

The other different versions of Christianity, some of them are completely false. Others of them, people will still be saved, but so as by fire. There's only one way of running that gives you the prize.

Paul says in verse 24, "Run in a way that you receive the prize."

VISION TO OBTAIN THE PRIZE

Well, my question is, do you even have a vision to get that prize? Is that even on your mind, that there is a prize that you'll have for billions of years in the resurrection? Or, is your focus on having a cool ministry, and having things go pretty well in your life right now?

If that's your vision, which is the vision of most people, you're sure to be discouraged and offended at God many times in your life. If your main prize is that things go pretty well on the earth—a little honor, a little money, some friends—things are going pretty well and you have a good ministry; if that's your prize, you are assured to be offended many times at God throughout your life.

You change what the goal of your heart is. "Lord, I want to have some cool friends, and I want to have enough money and enough honor. I want a cool ministry!" All of those are nice things so long as it isn't the prize of your heart. I'm going for the prize.

"What is the prize?" It's the crown of life.

LIVING THE LIFE THAT IS PERFECT

"How do you get it?"

There's only one way to get it, by living the life that is perfect. Again, I'm using the word *perfect* as *mature* because that's how it's meant in the Bible, is to be complete in my obedience.

OK, so you're twenty-two years old. "OK, the money thing, I've got that down."

"Yeah, but you don't know if you have that down. Lots of people are faithful when they have none." Honestly! I'm saying that to be funny, but it's true. I was friends with many people in their twenties who were radical for God with their money. During their fifties, most of the money is theirs now.

"OK, the money issue, got that... OK, the physical appetites. Hmmm, I've got to work on that one."

"OK, twenty-two year olds."

"Pride? Ugh! I'm trying hard. Speech, oh, that's the worst of all! Eyes, oh, that's worse than speech! Time? Ack, my time is pretty scattered..."

“Beloved, OK, you’re twenty-two. You might have till you’re twenty-three, you might have until you’re ninety-two. You have one huge assignment, to bring every area of your life into complete obedience—to be complete in obedience before you finish the race. That’s your huge responsibility. If you do that, you get the prize.”

“OK. Huh. OK, we’re going to work on the money, we’re going to work on the words, we’re going to work on the time, we’re going to work on the eyes, we’re going to work on all these things.”

“There you go, now you’re in the kingdom of God! That’s the kingdom of God; that’s the prize.”

TEMPERATE IN EVERYTHING

Look at what Paul says in verse 25: “Everyone who competes for the prize in the natural is temperate in everything” (1 Cor. 9:25, paraphrased). For *temperate*, you can put the word *disciplined* or *restrained*.

I’ve had the opportunity over the years to meet some world-class—I don’t know if *world-class* is the exact word; national level at least, and beyond, athletes; people who were the best in their field in the nation and in the midst of nations. These guys I’m thinking of were so calculated with their diet, their time; everything was calculated to get them to win the gold medal—everything in their life, from morning, noon and night, for years.

They had one thing in mind—the prize. They were temperate.

Beloved, if men and women will do that for a perishable gold medal at the Olympics, why is it that we have used the doctrine of grace to cancel out our discipline in all the areas of our lives? The doctrine of grace is not meant to make us comfortable while we’re sinning; the doctrine of grace is meant to give us power to be obedient in every area.

The doctrine of grace is meant to empower us to be temperate. It isn’t to make us feel good while we’re slothful. That’s not what grace is about.

Are you temperate?

Paul says, “If you’re going to win, you’ve got to be temperate in all the areas of your life.”

“Oh man, I’ve got a lot of work to go!” You might have a little time to get it in you; no guarantee, but you might. It’s time to get going, now.

RUNNING WITH CERTAINTY

In verse 26, Paul says: “Therefore I run this: not with uncertainty” (1 Cor. 9:26). Many believers whom I know, the idea of running is their lifestyle. Running is synonymous with their lifestyle in Paul’s writing here. They run with significant lack of certainty.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know!”

“Well, what’s your goal?”

“You know, do the stuff, whatever.”

“No, tell me specifically.”

“Well, I would like to get married.”

“That’s not what I mean. Ninety-percent of the people say that.”

“Get rich, have friends, get married.”

“I understand that, but what is your goal?”

“Have kids!”

“No, I’m not talking about where you’re going to live and the size of your family. What’s the goal of your heart?”

“To love God.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, just... love Him!”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s about it for now.” They’re living with absolutely no certainty in their lives and no focus about their lifestyle. Paul’s certainty was for the age to come. He had the prize in his mind of the upward call. He had the prize of the crown of life.

He said, “I run, not with lack of certainty; I have total clarity. I know where I’m going and I know how I’m planning to get there. I am going to be complete in all of my obedience, and it doesn’t matter what it costs me. This trophy is before me”—and that is the prize, and the highest call he has in the age to come.

BRINGING OUR BODIES UNDER SUBJECTION

“I discipline my body”—this is the same idea as being temperate in verse 25—“and bring it into subjection” (1 Cor. 9:27).

We have this idea that Paul the apostle got anointed so that everything he did was instant obedience. No, read Romans 7. I mean, Paul loved God, but he kept sinning. He said, “I hate this.”

He said, “I... bring my body under subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27).

What does he mean by disqualified? He doesn't mean he's going to lose his salvation. He says, “I want to win the prize. I don't want to live in such a way that I come up short of the prize of the upward call, this crown of life.” He said, “I want it desperately.”

“I HAVE Poured OUT MY LIFE AS A DRINK OFFERING”

Paragraph K. Let's read 2 Timothy 4. This is at the very end of Paul's life; it's the last epistle, or the last letter, of Paul. He writes it to his son in the faith, Timothy.

Timothy is probably in his mid-thirties. Interestingly, Paul calls him a young man in 1 Timothy. He's in his thirties! The apostles were maybe eighteen or nineteen when they started off.

Anyway, I find that interesting.

In 2 Timothy 4, Paul is in prison, and here's what he says. He dies right after this; he dies right after he writes this letter. Maybe some weeks later; he had a little time, maybe even a month or two. No one knows for sure, that's conjecture, but a short amount of time.

He says this: “I am already being poured out as a drink offering” (2 Tim. 4:6). That was an Old Testament term; drink offerings were poured out as a gift to God.

He says, “I have poured out my life as a drink offering to God.” He says, “I am at the end. I've been doing this thing now for about thirty, forty years.” He says, “I look back now, and my life has been a drink offering.” It's an offering poured out before the Lord.”

Beloved, I want to ask you this: At the end of your life, are you going to say, “My life was poured out, with truth”?

This is the hour you can determine where you can make that statement. You cannot, on your deathbed, or before your martyrdom, say, “I wish I was poured out.” That's not what he was talking about. He said, “I lived, I was poured out.” He really did. His being poured out in the ultimate sense here was his martyrdom. It really is, but what he's saying here is, he has lived a lifestyle of being poured out.

“I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE; I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH”

Paul says, “The time of my departure is at hand” (2 Tim. 4:6). That's his death. He says, “Timothy, I am going to die. I have heard the guards talking. I am going to die soon. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race.”

He constantly talks about his lifestyle, the journey of his life, as a race, all the way, in many of his letters or epistles.

“I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). When he says he kept the faith, he’s not saying, “Oh, praise God, I didn’t deny the Lord!” That’s not what he’s talking about. He’s talking about how he kept steady in all the things he believed in.

PAUL WON THE CROWN

Look at verse 8. Verse 8 is a stunning verse. Here he is, in prison about to die. He says, “There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will give to me on that day” (2 Tim. 4:8).

Somewhere in that prison cell, the Holy Spirit spoke to him. The Lord said to Paul in a dream, “The race is over, the prize is yours, you’ve got it!”

He’s in the prison saying, “I got it, I got it. The crown! I got the crown of life. Oh, I knew I was going to get it; I could tell it was working the right way.

“I got it.”

Back in Philippians 3, he said, “I’m not sure I have it. I’m not at the very end yet. I don’t know, I haven’t attained it.” Here, his language is very different. He says, “The prize is mine.” He’s not talking about the crown of righteousness being salvation. He’s not saying, “Oh, praise God, I ended up born again!” That’s not what he’s saying. He says, “I finished, and the crown is mine. It worked. For billions of years, I’m going to live in the fruit of the wisdom that I’ve lived in for the last thirty or forty years.”

He says, “Yes, God; yes, God.”

Beloved, are you, am I, are we going to finish our race with the testimony in our spirit that we got the crown? The prize? The highest calling that God has for you in the age to come?

The age to come is going to go for billions of years. We’re only down here fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety years. We’re there for billions.

Yes, when we get there, our capacities will increase. Praise God, we don’t stay forever in the state in which we arrived in the city. We grow in glory throughout all of history.

I want to live with this prize in view.

Amen. Let’s stand.