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Pursuing the Prize

3: 12-16

Pursuing the prize DIG: Using the imagery of a track race, where does Paul picture himself in his spiritual life? What prize is he after? How is it known when he has reached his goal? What is perfectionism? How is it dangerous? What is sanctification? When and where would Paul receive his prize? How are we perfect?

REFLECT: Comparing your spiritual life now to a race, are you sitting it out due to lack of practice, an injury, or no warm-up? Are you standing in the blocks? Going full speed? Ready to give up? Why? What hurdles seem especially high to jump over? Is the goal of a believer a comfortable experience on this earth?

Paul's present: the athlete, "I pursue" showing maximum effort.

As John MacArthur relates in his commentary on *Philippians*, judging from the frequent use of athletic metaphors in his writings, **the apostle Paul** must have been a sports fan. Speaking of his desire to be effective in **his** godly life, **Paul** wrote: **I box in such a way, as not beating the air (First Corinthians 9:26b).** He described the life of a believer to **the Ephesians** as a **struggle** (Greek: *pale*, meaning *a wrestling match or a fight*) . . . **not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).** In what might be considered **his** epitaph, **Paul** triumphantly declared: **I have fought the good fight (Second Timothy 4:7a).** In a reference to the Isthmian Games (held in Corinth and second in importance only to the Olympic Games), **he** reminded **the Corinthians**, **"Everyone who competes in the games' exercises self-control in all things. They then do not receive a perishable wreath, but we receive an imperishable crown"** (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians**, **to see link click [Bc](#) - For We Must All Appear Before the Bema of Messiah**).



But **Paul's** favorite athletic metaphor is that of a **footrace**. He declared to the **Ephesian** elders: **I do not consider my life any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my race and the ministry which I received from the Lord Yeshua, to testify solemnly of the Gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24)**. Reminding **the Corinthians** of the dedicated athlete who competed in the Isthmian games, **the apostle** wrote: **Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win (First Corinthians 9:24)**. At the close of **his** life, **Paul** could declare: **I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (Second Timothy 4:7b)**.

The previous file (see **Bh** - **Paul's Response to His Opponents**) described **Paul's** transformation when **he** encountered **the** risen **Messiah** on the Damascus Road. Then **the apostle** recited **his** impressive credentials. However, **he** then declared that compared to the surpassing value of knowing **the Master**, those achievements were mere **rubbish**. **Paul** exchanged **his** useless human achievements for the knowledge, righteousness, power, fellowship, and **glory** of **the Lord Yeshua Messiah**.

But it seems that some of the believers in **Philippi** may have mistakenly assumed that, having gained those marvelous benefits, that **Paul** had **reached** spiritual **perfection** (see *Perfectionism* by B. B. Warfield, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1931). **The Judaizers** (see **Galatians Ag** - **Who Were the Judaizers**) may also have taught **the Philippians** that spiritual **perfection** was attainable through being circumcised and Torah observance. There were also heretics (forerunners of the second-century Gnostics) who taught that spiritual **perfection** awaited those who attained a certain level of knowledge. To counter such false ideas, **Paul** quickly added these verses, relating **six necessary prerequisites** for effective **reaching**

for the heavenly prize of **bodily resurrection** and the full realization of **God's** promises that come with it.¹⁴³

1. Pursuing the prize requires a proper awareness: Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect (3:12a CJB). The verb translated **perfect** (from *teleioo*) has the sense here of something that is brought to conclusion or fulfills its ultimate goal. The perfect tense of the verb stresses the state or condition of **perfection** or completion that **the bodily resurrection** will bring, while the passive voice indicates that it was not **Paul** who is doing the **perfecting**, but rather that **he** is being **perfected** by someone else (**God**).¹⁴⁴ Now all believers are eternally secure (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms – The Eternal Security of the Believer**). That spiritual reality cannot be improved upon, but our **sanctification** (see **Ax – Sanctification**) can, and must, be. Knowing that we are not now what we should be, and what we will someday be in **glory**, must not produce apathy, but a zeal for **running the race toward the heavenly prize**. That is **the Ruach's** work in us (**Second Corinthians 3:18**) and the longing of every regenerated soul.¹⁴⁵

So, **Paul** sprinted **toward the prize** to which **ADONAI** had called **him** in that confrontation on the Damascus Road (see the commentary on **Acts Bc – Sha'ul Turns from Murder to the Messiah**). Those who are maturing **in Messiah** will share **Paul's** mind-set, not being complacent; but rather, striving to know **the Lord** more fully and to reflect **Him** more **faithfully**. **The grace** that we have already received invites us to **the greater grace** ahead. **Paul** rejects every version of **perfection**, ancient or modern, that promises relief from **the race** in exchange for any reward that falls short of **the imperishable crown** that we shall receive in **heaven**. **Paul** refuses to be sidelined short of that goal. Nor will **he** let **his** friends at **Philippi** drop out of **the race**. **He** urged **them**, as **he** urges us, to keep pace with **him** all the way to the finish line.¹⁴⁶

2. Pursuing the prize requires a maximum effort: This verse is the heart of the passage. In contrast to thinking **he** had arrived or had been made **perfect**, **Paul** said **he** was **pursuing the prize** (Greek: *dioko*, meaning *to run* or *follow after aggressively*). The verb translated **pursue** is the same one **he** used in **3:6** to recall **his** persecution of the Messianic Community before **he** was saved. The result is a subtle wordplay that is impossible to bring into English. In effect, **Paul** says that **he** was determined to devote the same sort of intense energy and maximum effort that was once directed towards persecuting believers, to **pursuing** being made into **the**

likeness of Messiah. Because **his** ultimate goal was the state of **perfection** at **the resurrection**, **he** continually **pursued it** in the present **to make** that final **perfection [his] own**. In other words, **the apostle** pictures **himself** as **a runner pursuing** a goal placed before **him** – the state of **perfection** that will be realized at **his resurrection** (see the commentary on **Revelation Ff – Blessed and Holy are Those Who Have Part in the First Resurrection**). However, **Paul** was only able to **pursue** this state of **perfection** because **Messiah Yeshua had made him His own (3:12b Greek)**. The only reason that **Paul** was able to make **perfection his own** is that **Messiah** had first made **Paul His own**.¹⁴⁷

Paul was a prisoner of war, and glad of it. **Messiah** confronted **Rabbi Sha'ul** on the Damascus Road (see the commentary on **Galatians Ao – God Set Me Apart and Called Me through His Grace**) and laid sovereign claim to **His** enemies' allegiance. Because **Messiah** had laid hold of **Paul** and would never let go, **Paul** would one day lay hold of the **perfection** awaiting **him** at the finish line in **heaven**, and never let go.¹⁴⁸ The picture is that of **Messiah pursuing** and overtaking the sinner who is **running** away from **Him**, making him **His** own, and then leading him in a new direction to **pursue** the final goal of **perfection**.

3. Pursuing the prize requires a focused concentration: Maximum effort without focused concentration is useless. Every athlete knows that **runners** in a **race** must fix their eyes ahead of them; those who watch the crowd or their own feet are likely to trip and fall. To make a maximum effort in any athletic endeavor requires the participants to concentrate on a point straight ahead. **Paul** addresses **the Philippians** with the gentle, intimate, affectionate **brothers and sisters** to move **their** hearts away from **the Judaizers** and toward **him**. For the third time **Paul** adds the disclaimer: **For my part, I don't think of myself as being perfected**. Here, **the apostle** directed **his** argument at those who were teaching error, and **he** wanted to make the truth abundantly clear. Despite the claims of the false teachers to the contrary, spiritual **perfection** is not possible in this life! However, **Paul** had a laser-focused concentration on the life-long process of **sanctification**. **But** how would **he** accomplish that goal? **He** responded: **This one thing I do: forgetting things which are behind me**.¹⁴⁹ **Paul** didn't keep thinking about the past; **he** didn't constantly remind **himself** of all **his** past achievements (see **Bh – Paul's Response to His Opponents: Religious credits that do not impress God**). **He strained forward toward what was ahead of him (3:13 Greek)**. **Straining forward** perfectly captures the picture of **a runner**, with every muscle engaged, drawing on every ounce of energy, in the final all-out sprint to the

finish line.

The way **Paul runs his race** poses heart-searching questions for you and me. If your thought life, daily routine, spending practices, and interpersonal interactions were translated into **Paul's** athletic imagery, what would it look like? Are you “**running** aimlessly?” Is your pace hindered by backward glances toward previous days, or sideways glances at other **runners**? Since **Messiah** has captured you in **His** amazing **grace**, can you rest on your laurels. Can you direct your aim, imagination, time, energy, and money toward the precious **prize** that **Paul pursues**? Then rivet your gaze on the goal, on **the prize** that **he** found irresistibly attractive, and **run** with all the strength and stamina that **Messiah** can give you!¹⁵⁰

4. Pursuing the prize requires a proper motivation: It is a metaphor of a believer's life that declares: **I pursue the goal and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Messiah Yeshua, is calling us (3:14 Greek)**. As noted earlier, this idea is the heart of the passage. The present tense **I pursue** expresses **Paul's** continuous effort to attain **his prize** of being ushered into **God's** glorious presence in **heaven**. As noted above, **perfection** is not attainable in this life. The finish line is in **heaven**, where the rewards will be handed out (**Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:23; First Corinthians 3:12-15**). Like **a runner** triumphantly pumping his fist in the air as he approaches the finish line, **Paul** declared at the end of **his** life: **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith; in the future that is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day (Second Timothy 4:7-8)**. Only **in the future** would **Paul** receive **the crown of righteousness (Messiah's righteousness transferred to him)**; only then, would **he** receive **the prize** which **he** so diligently **pursued**.¹⁵¹

The goal of the life of a believer is not the most comfortable existence here on this earth. By calling us to **Himself** in **Messiah Yeshua**, **ADONAI** has given us a higher calling, one that aims for nothing less than the fullness in this present evil age will necessarily involve suffering, but such sufferings **are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18)**. It is our shame that we too often settle for what the world offers to us as satisfying when far greater treasures are ours in **Messiah**, both in this world and the world to come. When we, as believers, set as our goal the fullest experience of all that **YHVH** has for us in **Messiah**, we are truly the richest people on earth.¹⁵²

5. Pursuing the prize requires a proper recognition: **Paul** was not in the

spiritual **race** alone; it includes all believers, described here by the phrase: **as many of us are perfect (3:15a Greek)**. The **apostle** is not speaking of **heavenly perfection**; that would contradict what **he** said earlier in **3:12a**. That **perfection** does not come until believers are **glorified** (see [Ax](#) - **Sanctification: Ultimate sanctification**). Rather, in a play on words, **he** describes believers as those who are positionally **perfect** (or **justified**) **in Messiah** (see [Ax](#) - **Sanctification: Positional sanctification**). Since **Paul** is arguing against those who taught that **perfection** is attainable in this life, **his** use of the word **perfect** may be a bit double-edged, with a twinge of sarcasm. Those **false teachers** were not **perfect** in either practice or position.

Every true believer must **have this** same **attitude** that **Paul** had (**3:15b Greek**). Like **the apostle**, believers must be totally focused on making the maximum effort to **pursue the prize of glorification**. We know how **Messiah** thinks because the Bible gives us **His** mind; therefore, **we have the mind of Messiah (First Corinthians 2:16b)**. When we think biblical, divine thoughts, viewing all of life from **the Lord's** perspective, those thoughts will mold our behavior so that we become more like **Him**.

But **Paul** was an experienced pastor and knew that not all believers would share **his** relentless focus on **pursuing the prize**. To them, **Paul** said: **If you have a different attitude in anything, God will also reveal this to you (3:15c Greek)**. Those who refuse to heed **Paul's** message will hear that same message from **ADONAI**. **He** will correct them through **His Word, His Spirit**, or through **His discipline** (see [Hebrews Cz](#) - **God Disciplines His Children**). **God** will do whatever it takes to make sure that believers recognize their need to **pursue the prize of being conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29a)**. **He** will also provide the resources we need to do that very thing: **By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness (Second Peter 1:3)**.

6. Pursuing the prize requires a proper consistency: One more thing, having developed a **proper awareness, effort, concentration, motivation**, and **recognition**, believers must **consistently live by the same standard to which we have attained (3:16 NASB)**. In other words, believers must stay on the same spiritual path that they had been following. To use the metaphor of **a race**, they needed to keep **running** in their lane. Four divinely provided resources help us **consistently pursue the prize** as we sprint to the finish line of life. First is **the**

Word of God. Peter wrote: **Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the Word, so that by it you may grow with respect to salvation (First Peter 2:2).** Second is prayer. **Paul** prayed that **the Corinthians** would **be made complete (Second Corinthians 13:9).** Third is following a godly example. **Paul** encouraged **the Corinthians: Be imitators of me (First Corinthians 4:16; cf. First Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; First Thessalonians 1:6; Second Thessalonians 3:7 and 9; First Timothy 4:12; Hebrews 13:7; First Peter 5:3).** Finally, **ADONAI** uses trials to mold us **into the image of Yeshua Messiah: After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Messiah, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you (First Peter 5:10; cf. James 1:2-4).**¹⁵³ Salvation is by **grace** alone, through **faith** alone, in **Messiah** alone, so that **ADONAI** alone receives all **the glory**.

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for **Your Word** and **Your** wisdom to discern that I am far from **perfect** in this life. **Lord**, help me run **the race** of sanctification, keeping my eyes on **the prize** of glorification when I am finally with **You** in heaven. Help me be consistent in my pursuit of holiness. Then, and only then, will I be **perfect** as You are, minus your deity. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*