

Gaining Christ – Glorification and Perseverance

¹¹if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ¹³Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:11–14)

My wife and I both grew up in churches that liked to sing about Heaven. In fact, the hymns about heaven were some of the favourites. Unfortunately, they were favourites for the wrong reasons. Hymns like When We All Get to Heaven, Shall We Gather at the River, When The Roll is Called Up Yonder, Face to Face With Christ My Saviour, In the Sweet By and By. These were liked mostly for their galloping tunes and jazzy rhythms. But the words of these hymns were the most disappointing, in retrospect. These were hymns about Heaven, but the bulk of what they sang about was mansions, streets of gold, pearly gates, and cliches about victory, crossing rivers, reaching shores. In these hymns, Heaven sounded like an eternal picnic, with angels and shiny things thrown in. The whole concept of Heaven was relief from Earth, victory, reward, vindication. Conspicuously missing from these hymns was the idea that Heaven is Heaven because God is there. Missing from these hymns was the idea captured in Anne Cousin's hymn The Sands of Time Are Sinking. She wrote:

The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory
But on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth
But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Emmanuel's land.

If you could have all the gold and silver and mansions and fountains of Heaven, but not have Christ, would you still want to go? If you are bored with worship in this life, why would you want Heaven in the next?

“God must always be sought for Himself—never as a means toward something else. Whoever seeks God as a means toward desired selfish ends, will not find God. The mighty God, the maker of heaven and earth, will not be one of many treasures, not even the chief of all treasures. He will be all in all—or He will be nothing. God will not be used.” - Tozer. We do not use God to get to Heaven. Heaven is the culmination of knowing and loving God.

Paul understood the all or nothing principle regarding knowing and loving Christ, and he has talked about it in his own life in chapter 3. He was willing to lose all that he might gain Christ. Paul has told us what life is really about: gaining Christ: being in union with Him. That happens in three ways: by justification, sanctification, and glorification. One is past salvation, the second is present salvation, and the third is future salvation.

In justification, we are saved from the penalty or punishment for sin. In sanctification, we are saved from the power of sin. In glorification we will be saved from the presence of sin. Christ's righteousness is imputed to us in justification. Christ's righteousness is imparted to us in sanctification. Christ's righteousness is imbedded in us in glorification.

Glorification is when justification and sanctification truly unite. It's where a perfect position in

Christ and an imperfect practice now combine so that that perfect righteousness of Christ that was imputed to you and progressively imparted to you is now fully imbedded in you, and indwelling sin is put away. But the upshot of that is that you finally gain Christ fully. The objective perfection of justification, and the subjective experience of growing into that perfection now perfectly unite in glorification.

You are with Him face to face. No longer will you see in a mirror, dimly, but face to face. Now we know in part, but then we shall know just as we also are known.

This desire for glorification is what Paul began the letter with when saying he was torn between staying alive here on Earth to serve the Philippians and dying to be with Christ.

²¹For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. (Philippians 1:21–23)

As Paul finishes his most powerful autobiographical section, he takes it to its natural climax. Paul wants to know Christ, be in union with Him, and that will culminate in glorification. This is where it is all going. Verse 9 showed us gaining Christ in justification. Verse 10 showed us gaining Christ in sanctification. Verse 11 teaches us about gaining Christ in glorification, and the next three verses show us how to exercise faith in that reality. This passage will show us the hope of glorification, the humility about glorification, and the heart for glorification.

I. The Hope of Glorification

¹¹if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul's ultimate hope is to attain, to arrive at the resurrection of the dead.

Why does Paul say, “if by any means”? That may sound to you as if Paul is unsure. But he doesn't mean, it is unlikely that I will attain to this resurrection. It means, by all means available to me, I strive for this. What means were those? The faith of verse 9, the faith of verse 10, and now the faith he will describe in verses 11 through 14. We'll see in verses 12 and 13 that his apparent uncertainty is not uncertainty; it is a humility that is fuel for endurance. He knows he will be glorified, but he is still in the process of getting there.

Why does Paul call glorification “the resurrection from the dead”? Why doesn't he say, “be in Heaven one day” or “be in God's presence”? Well, let's eliminate some wrong answers to that question. It is not because Paul believes what some cultists believe, that when you die, your soul sleeps until the resurrection. Paul does not expect that when he dies, his soul will sleep in some unconscious state, and only when the resurrection takes place, will he wake up and experience glory. No, Paul explains in 2 Corinthians that there are three states a human can be in regarding the material body and the immaterial soul and spirit.

¹For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, ³if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. ⁴For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. ⁵Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. ⁶So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. ⁷For we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:1–8)

State number one is in verse 2, 4 and 6. It is to be alive right now in these unredeemed bodies. We groan in them, because of their weakness and pain, and knowing that when we are home in them, we are absent from the Lord.

State number two is in verse 8, and hinted at in verse 3 and 4. This is when we die, and we leave the body and go into the presence of God. Like the thief on the cross, to whom Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise". Like Hebrews 12 tells us that in Heaven there are the spirits of just men made perfect. The spirit and souls of believers go into the presence of God when they are absent from the body. There is a split, and you leave one to go to the other. But Paul hints that this stage is a kind of nakedness for the soul, a kind of incomplete state of not having your final, eternal clothing. That brings us to the last state.

State number 3 is implied in verses 1 through 4. One day, our spirits that are in the presence of God will be clothed with an eternal garment, housed in a permanent home: a resurrection body made by God, eternal in the Heavens.

Paul does not believe in soul sleep. He believes you live, you die and go into God's presence, and you then await your resurrection body.

But again, why does Paul focus on this?

The answer is that in Christian theology, glorification is only complete at the resurrection. Glorification is not some completely otherworldly, non-physical state. Glorification is the restoration of bodies, of even places. God plans not only to raise up our bodies from death, but according to Romans 8, he plans to raise up the whole universe from death.

God's plan was never to just abandon His work. His plan was to redeem it with the blood of His Son. Jesus the first to rise from the dead, then all those who are in Christ, then even the unsaved to be judged, and then finally the Earth itself, becoming the New Heavens and the New Earth. The resurrection of the dead represents that great final moment when all things have been perfected: evil has been judged, we have been perfected and given our eternal bodies, and now the Earth itself has been raised from a fiery grave into a glorified and perfected state.

²⁰For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. (Philippians 3:20–21)

This is the hope of Christianity. By all lawful and God-given means, Paul wishes to attain to glorification. This is of surpassing worth, this is more beautiful, more valuable, more satisfying, more glorious than anything else life has. This is the moment when Paul will be face to face with Christ in a glorified body that can handle that glory.

Now, how certain is Paul that he will experience this? Now justification is in the past, sanctification is in the present, but glorification is in the future. What sort of certainty can you have about this?

II. The Humility About Glorification

¹²Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected;.... ¹³Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; Philippians 3:12a, 13a)

Now three times here Paul is clear that he has not reached the state at which someone is glorified. Twice in the first part of verse 12 and the first part of verse 13 say the same thing.

Verse 12, I haven't received or obtained this state. I have not been perfected, reached completion or faultless maturity. That's what it is like to be glorified, when justification and sanctification combine.

Verse 13: I don't consider myself to be one who has grabbed hold of the prize at the finish line. Put simply, I have not arrived, I have not reached sinless perfection, I have not reached the goal.

Why does Paul say this? Paul is not doubtful of God's saving power or of eternal security. He is not saying, "I am uncertain if I will be glorified." He never once says, "It is doubtful that I will attain or be perfected, or apprehend". He is not expressing doubt or insecurity. He has already told us how certain he is that when he dies he will be with Christ.

Instead, what Paul means is that it isn't over until it's over. A Christian doesn't reach a point in his life when he can say, "I think I've done enough to be absolutely guaranteed that I'm a true Christian. From here on out, I am going to coast on the momentum of all the years I've served Christ." That would be confusing future glorification with present-tense sanctification.

No, Paul here gives us another beautiful insight into the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Paul is expressing humility that I have not reached the goal, I have not arrived, and until I do, I have no right to stop running. I am a believer, but I am not allowed to coast.

A Christian is saved by faith alone. But the faith that is genuine does not stop believing before the life is over. The faith that is genuine keeps believing, perseveres. True faith never stops with a kind of arrogant self-confidence that thinks it can coast. True faith never takes the promises of eternal security as license to coast, to stop running, to expect to be carried.

That is the sign of a false faith, and a version of it has been taught in our circles. Some have taught that because true salvation is eternal, and you can never lose your salvation, that all you have to do is believe in justification. If you believe at one time in your life, then those promises are yours, and all you have to do is never doubt they are yours. You kind of leap from faith in justification to an unshakable faith in already-realised glorification.

What you do after that is irrelevant, because you are eternally secure. Emerging from this distortion of the doctrine of eternal security are people who teach that it really doesn't matter how you live after your supposed conversion, because once saved always saved.

But this is a distortion. Once truly saved, always truly saved, and one of the signs that you are truly saved is that your faith has a present-tense, ongoing attitude of humility.

Paul does not confuse eternal security with assurance of salvation. The one is an objective reality of what God does and promises to do. You are eternally secure because of what God does. You cannot be lost.

Assurance of salvation is a subjective experience of knowing and sensing that you are in Christ, and His promises are yours. How do you get assurance? The doctrine of perseverance. Perseverance is humble precisely because it says, I haven't reached the goal. Apostates are known to reveal their apostasy sometimes 5 meters from the finish line. Apostates have fooled themselves for decades that they are true Christians. But this kind of humility says, every day, one more honest lap around the track, and I thank God I'm still in the race.

Humble perseverance sustains assurance. Every day that you are pursuing Christ becomes fruitful evidence that you have real faith, God-given faith, which has not failed, not apostatised, not turned back.

This is the humility that surrounds our future glorification.

III. The Heart for Glorification: Endurance

^{12b} but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ^{13b}...but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Again, the end of verse 12 and the beginning of verse 14.

The main action in both these verses gives us the heart we should have towards glorification. It is the word “press”. This means to hasten, to move swiftly to an objective. The word is even used to pursue, to persecute. It has an aggressive quality to it. I urge myself on, and I press toward to grasp, to obtain the very thing for which Christ grasped me. Paul wants to highlight that grace comes before faith, God's initiative before our response. Christ laid hold of me in justification and sanctification; now I press forward to lay hold of, verse 14, the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. The word here for goal was the finishing post of a runner in the ancient stadia. The word for prize was the wreath made of leaves that were awarded to winners in the games.

The image is clear: the race we are running right now is life in the present; the awards ceremony will be glorification. Clearly, Paul has in mind the day of being in Christ's presence, or receiving the ultimate reward of being face to face with Him.

So what is one word that sums up how a believer lives in light of future glorification? Endurance. Pressing on. Persevering. We have absolute certainty that God will raise us up with Christ. We maintain humility that as long as we are in this body, we haven't arrived, the race is not over. So the next logical thing is: we keep running. We press on, we press toward, we don't stop running.

You could think of it as the posture which faith adopts towards Christ regarding justification, sanctification, and glorification. In justification, faith rests alone, trusts alone in the finished work of Christ. In sanctification, faith dies and rises with Him, fellowshiping with Him in sufferings, knowing Him through His enabling resurrection power. In glorification, faith endures, keeping our eyes on the finish line, not stopping, not quitting until the race is completely over.

In verse 13, Paul gives the secret of pressing on, pressing forward to obtain, to reach the goal. He says, this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,
Singleminded, focused obedience.

One thing I do. I am determined to press on, to press forward till I reach the finish line. Anything which begins to seem like a hindrance, an encumbrance, a trap, a weight, I won't tolerate. I must finish, Paul says, and I will make sure I do. We're reminded of Hebrews 12:

¹Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

²looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1–2)

Many Christians live distracted, divided, cluttered lives. They are weighed down with their own lack of discipline, their carelessness, their worldliness, spiritual apathy. They can't say, “this one thing I do”. It is no wonder that Jesus said that the third soil are those Luke 8:14 “who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.”

To help him remain focused in pressing on, Paul has a twofold action: he deliberately forgets what

is behind, and reaches forward to what is ahead.

Do you want enduring faith that is motivated by Heaven? Begin by turning your attention away from your past. Forgetting doesn't mean amnesia; it means Paul chose to disregard as important what he had already done. That could be both good things and bad things. Paul had plenty of good things he could look back on and boast in: he listed them out at the beginning of the chapter. He also had plenty of things he could now deeply regret and feel shame over: his murder of Christians. But if Paul dwelt there, he could not press on and forwards. He could not look back, and hope to run straight.

Memory is a good thing when it leads to thanksgiving; when it leads to confession and repentance, when it leads to helpful urging towards obedience. But when we begin to long for the past in nostalgia, or wish we were in our past, or feel guilty and paralysed by our past, then we are not exercising faith. Misplaced guilt, inconsolable regrets, sentimental longings for previous better days: these are based in discontent, unbelief, shame.

Many a Christian runner feels himself slowing down, and close to stopping because he is starting to look back instead of forwards. Enduring faith pressing towards glorification does not look back.

The twin action that Paul gives here is that he reaches forward to the things that are ahead. Put simply, this is hope. All the good things in Christ are coming to us in the future. The future for a Christian can only get better. More maturity, more wisdom, more opportunities for service, more eternal rewards, more grace when we get weaker, and finally Heaven itself, eternity in His presence, sin, suffering and death gone forever. To these things enduring faith reaches forward, pressing on, pressing toward, for the prize, to obtain, to lay hold.

When do you stop enduring, when do you stop running, when can you stop having this humble, enduring faith? When glorification happens. When faith turns to sight. When you cross the finish line. When your justification and your sanctification unite, and you gain Christ fully and face to face.

The King there in his beauty without a veil is seen;
It is a well-spent journey, though death lies here between.
The Lamb with his fair army does on Mount Zion stand.
Glory, glory, in Immanuel's land.
Oh, glory, glory, glory in Immanuel's land.