

- ***READ I Corinthians 9:24-27*** Being a 90s baby, I grew up right in the middle of the era when Nintendo GameBoys were becoming extremely popular. Some of the most popular GameBoy games at that time were the Pokemon games. This was a game where you played a young man who left home to go out into the world and catch, train, and battle with creatures known as Pokemon. I can remember vividly playing this game nearly every time my family was in the car going out and about to different places. I especially loved the trips to church because we lived pretty far from the building, so I would have a solid 40-50 minutes to play there and back. The goal of this game was to battle all of the gym leaders, the elite 4, and the champion so that you could be named the champion. All that would be left after that would be to collect all 151 species of Pokemon. After that...well...you had beat the game and there wasn't much else to do except do it again or get another game in the series.
- At least that was the case until about two and a half years ago when a new Pokemon game was released on mobile devices. This game continues to evolve with new features being added every so often, and the reality is that there doesn't seem to really be an end goal in sight at the moment. I'm sure the game will finally run its course and the game itself will have an end, and that is to be expected because that is the norm for just about every game or competition I can think of. For those who play sports, the goal is to win the championship or to be at the top of your sport in another way. Any other sort of competition has basically the same premise. There is a goal and once that goal is reached the competition ends and people move on.
- Did you happen to notice in our text that Paul describes the life of the Christian in sporting or competitive terms? In this text we find Paul alluding to the Christian life as if one is running a race or boxing. His point is that we must run or box with an aim or a purpose, and without doing so...we are simply spinning our wheels and we won't ever find ourselves successful. What then is the goal or purpose of our Christian life? The goal in my Pokemon games was to catch 'em all and beat all of the other trainers. The goal of a race is to finish the course and cross the finish line. The goal of a boxing match is to outlast your opponent. What is the finish line for the Christian? We might phrase the question this way...When we finish the course as Christians? This is an important question to ask, because we must be sure that we are not ceasing to give excellent effort too early. We must be sure that we do not quit running prior to actually crossing the finish line. What is the finish line? What is our goal? Let's seek to answer all of these questions by first looking at Paul's letter to the brethren who were living in Philippi.

I. Paul's Letter To The Philippians

A. A letter written to encourage disciples who were facing opposition & difficulties.

1. Paul's time spent with these brethren was not exactly time spent without incident. If we remember, Paul's time in Philippi is mostly remembered for the demon-possessed slave girl whom Paul eventually healed by casting out the demon. After doing such a thing, Paul was remanded by the slave girl's owner who had Paul beaten and thrown in prison for his healing of the slave girl who would no longer be able to bring the owner revenue by her abilities. **(Acts 16:16-23)** It was during this jailhouse visit that Paul and Silas are singing hymns and a great earthquake shakes the prison to its foundations so that the chains were loosened. The guard, fearing the prisoners had escaped, sought to take his own life, but Paul reassures him and goes on to share the Gospel with this man who, along with his whole household, was baptized into Christ that very night. Paul and Silas were soon released from prison and pleaded with to leave the city. They only had time a short time to be with and encourage these disciples before they had to leave.
2. It was only a short time spent with these disciples, but again we see Paul having such a fond affection for these saints that is stated clearly in the first few verses of this letter. *"I thank God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in*

view of your participation in the Gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:3-6) Paul would go on to say that it was only right for him to feel this way because these brethren continued to be partakers of God’s grace with Paul even through his difficulties and trials. He truly wanted to be with these brethren, but his current situation of being imprisoned prevented that from happening.

3. Most of us would see Paul as being in the position of needing to be encouraged since he was imprisoned! However, it was Paul, the prisoner, who wanted to encourage and strengthen these brethren. *“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in the real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ.” (Philippians 1:9,10)* It seems that these brethren were of good reputation and faith, and yet Paul wants for them to continue to abound still more and continue to pursue that which was excellent. They were doing well, but Paul wanted even more.
 4. Later on Paul would write, *“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel.” (Philippians 1:27)* Why the need for Paul to continue to urge faithfulness to these brethren? It seems that they were facing opposition from those outside of the faith. *“In no way alarmed by your opponents...” (Philippians 1:28)* As Paul would put it, these disciples were *“experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me.” (Philippians 1:30)* Yet, he saw this as an opportunity for them to suffer for the glorious sake of Christ. *(Philippians 1:29)* However, knowing that one is suffering for Christ doesn’t instantly make things easier or more bearable. Instead, what we find is Paul seeking to encourage these brethren by helping to develop within them a proper attitude and mindset.
- B. Paul, himself, had experienced his own share of difficulties, and seeks to share his attitude and mindset.**
1. Again, Paul recognizes that these brethren were experiencing what he had already gone through and what he was even presently going through. Paul had suffered in so many different ways for the sake of the Gospel, and yet he continued to persevere to greater and greater lengths to accomplish greater and greater progress within the kingdom. My question is how? How does any person experience what Paul had experienced in this life and still continue to *“press on?” (Philippians 3:12)* How was Paul able to *“rejoice in the Lord always?” (Philippians 4:4)* I think Paul answers these questions in chapters 3 & 4.
 2. The first answer is found in **Philippians 3:7,8**. These verses follow right on the heels of Paul detailing all of the accomplishments and boastings that were credited to his name while being Saul of Tarsus. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He was what we might refer to as an all-American. He was at the top of his class in all respects, and yet he is willing to say that all of those things were counted as rubbish (literal dung or excrement) for the sake of Christ. In fact, he states that he was willing to count any and everything as loss *“in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Philippians 3:8)* Paul was able to endure great loss because the only thing he truly valued was his fellowship with Christ. Everything else was expendable.
 3. Secondly, Paul was focused on those things that were excellent and worthy of praise. *“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” (Philippians 4:8)* Instead of allowing the difficulties of the journey to get him down, Paul was going to focus on the many blessings he enjoyed and most importantly the fruits of his labor. Look at what he was even doing in writing this letter! He was writing to encourage brethren who he had a hand in helping to establish through the Gospel. This was his greatest joy, and he was going to focus on these excellent and praise worthy thoughts even in the face of trials and difficulties.

4. Thirdly and lastly on this point, Paul was able to overcome the difficulties of this race of life by seeking to be someone who was always content with whatever circumstance he found himself in. As we have noted, Paul often found himself in tough situations. Even now at the writing of this letter he found himself in prison, and yet that didn't stop him from using his time as productively as possible. Notice, that this ability of Paul wasn't something that was necessarily innate. Paul wrote, *"Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am."* **(Philippians 4:11)** What could possibly motivate Paul to learn to be content whether he was in need or in prosperity, hungry or filled, thirsty or well drunk? It must have been his intense focus on Jesus, and this would even be the answer he gives as he would write just after these verses, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* **(Philippians 4:13)** That is really what says it all. It all has to do with Christ, and Paul knew that Jesus was the key if he wanted to be able to finish the race well and receive the prize.
- C. Paul recognizes that he has one goal in this life that will lead him to receiving the prize.
1. For everything that Paul could boast about when it came to his faith and service to Christ, Paul still recognized that he hadn't yet arrived at his final destination. He knew that he had much more work left still to do. *"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."* **(Philippians 3:12)** He would go on to say, *"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."* **(Philippians 3:13)** Paul plainly acknowledges that he had not yet arrived at the finish line in his Christian walk. He knew that he still had work left to do, so the question then becomes...what was the work Paul was still engaged in?
 2. To answer this question, I think we have to back up to chapter 2 to examine what Paul strongly encouraged the Philippians to do within themselves. Remember, these brethren were going through difficulties of some sort **(Philippians 1:28-30)**, and Paul seeks to offer them encouragement and aid in the form of reminding them of the love, fellowship, affection, and compassion that is found in Jesus. **(Philippians 2:1)** Further, they could make Paul's own joy complete by taking on the mindset of Jesus in making sure that they were not being selfish, conceited, or merely looking out for their own interest. **(Philippians 2:3,4)**
 3. Why was this so important to Paul? Surely it was because this was the mindset that was first found in Christ Jesus. In other words, Paul's admonitions to these brethren centered around them becoming more like Jesus in all of their character and actions. This is what I believe is the goal of Paul's pressing on in life. He was seeking to become more like Jesus in everything that he did. Had Paul become like Jesus in many ways? I would certainly have to say so, especially when we recognize that Paul was aware of his own striving to be like Jesus. He would tell the Corinthians to strive to imitate Paul's example because he himself was striving to imitate Jesus's example. **(I Corinthians 11:1)**
 4. I am convinced that Paul fully recognized that the goal of this life was to be like Jesus in all that we do, and that this goal would finally be accomplished not in this life, but when we pass from this life and enter into the next. I believe that becoming like Jesus in this life is the goal that will eventually lead us to receiving the amazing prize of being with Him for all of eternity in the next life. Paul recognized that his work and the work of the Philippians wasn't done in this life. Instead they had to keep right on working even up until the day of Christ Jesus came and the resurrection of the dead took place. **(Philippians 1:6,10; 3:11)** It was at this point that Paul believed his work would be accomplished. This was the mindset he believed all of the mature of Christ would come to possess within themselves **(Philippians 3:15-17)**, and it was the mindset he wanted the Philippians to imitate as they continued through this life struggling for the sake of Christ.

II. Answers To The Question

A. While we gain peace through Christ, we will not find true rest until the next life.

1. The reality is that the true rest of Christ's people will not be realized in this life. Yes, there is a sense in which we gain rest through Jesus, but I am convinced that is a rest from the sins of our past and the guilt of past sins that might weigh us down. Yes, Jesus invites us to Himself by saying, *"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light."* (**Matthew 11:28-30**) Notice that Jesus invites us to come Him in our tired state of carrying around sin. He promises that he would give us rest, but then turns right around and lays upon us another yoke. How does this makes sense? It must be that Jesus is unloading and overbearing weight from us in sin and then replacing it with His own yoke which is His expectations for us to be His own special people who will seek to do his will in all things.
2. Our willingness to do His will in this life isn't for the purpose of us having an easy life. Paul did not have an easy life as a saint. The Philippians did not have easy lives as disciples of Jesus. Friends, we don't have easy lives as Christians in 2019! And yet, the efforts that we put in to living for Jesus will certainly result in our eventual finishing of this race. Paul realized that he was only about to finish the race as his life was coming to a close. *"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing."* (**II Timothy 4:6-8**) Paul invited and longed for this day because he knew he had run well, and we must recognize the need to follow the example of Paul in running well all the days of our lives.

B. While running this race, our goal must be to conform to the image of Jesus.

1. Daily our goal should be to be more like Jesus in everything that we do because only through conforming to the image of Jesus can we stand before God and be counted faithful as one of his sons or daughters. The reality is that we will never become just like Jesus. He was sinless in all things and through we are not weighed down by the guilt or stain of sin because of His grace and forgiveness, the reality is that we can't be like the sinless Son of God. And yet, this still must be our ambition. We must be striving daily for excellence in all that we do.
2. This isn't our goal so that we might boast or become arrogant, but this is our ambition because this is God's will for us. It is His will and to His pleasure that we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. (**Philippians 2:12,13**) It is His will that we always put forth effort to put our own desires on the back burner so that we might do just as He would have for us to do. The second we fail to do this...we will only fall behind in this race and fail to reach the finish line of faithfulness. We know this is possible based upon the text of **Hebrews 4:1**, *"Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it."* What a horrible thing to be said of any of us that we gave great effort for some time as disciples only to give up and fall short of the finish line.

While Paul might not have been an actual race runner, he was someone who was intimately familiar with the principles that would help someone to win a race. He knew that it all came down to keep our eyes on the prize and not giving up short of the finish line. As we make efforts to continue to excel in all the we do in 2019, may we always keep the words of the Hebrew writer in our minds. *"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."* (**Hebrews 12:1**) May God be with us and strengthen us to run this race with endurance and reach the finish line of death or the coming of Jesus as a people of full and complete faithfulness to Jesus.