

LESSON NINE
ETERNAL FOCUS
(Philippians 3:12-21 NKJV)

REFLECTION

There are some who argue it's possible to be so "heavenly minded" that one is no earthly good. There are others, such as author C.S. Lewis, who insist those who think the most about the next world to come end up doing the most in this world. Which view do you think is right? What are your own habits and attitudes regarding heaven?

DRAWING NEAR

Faith can be compared to a long-term race. Were you ever involved in athletics? If so, what were some lessons you learned by participating in and/or watching your favorite sport?

SITUATION

When the apostle Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, it forever revolutionized his life. Up to that point he had been a strict follower of the Jewish law and zealous to honor all the Jewish customs, but his encounter with Christ completely transformed his understanding of salvation and infused him with new purpose (see **Acts 22:3-21**). Paul's driving passion was now, as he relates in this next section of his letter, to press on toward the goal to which God has called him: *to know Christ and make him known to the world*. Paul recognized that his time on this earth was short, and he had to use the moments God had given him to prepare for eternity.

OBSERVATION

Read **Philippians 3:12-21** (New King James Version)

EXPLORATION

1. How does Paul describe his own spiritual journey with Christ? What is his primary aim?

Answer: Paul describes his spiritual journey as an athletic event, more specifically as a race or pursuit. His aim or prize is Christlikeness.

2. What does this say about the need for perseverance in following Jesus?

Answer: The goal of obtaining Christlikeness is a lifelong pursuit. It begins when we are born again and the sanctification process continues throughout our lives. No matter how mature we think we are, there is still room for growth.

3. What does Paul teach here about goals, motivations and living an intentional life?

Answer: As believers we must refuse to rely on past virtuous deeds and achievements in ministry or to dwell on sins and failures. To be distracted by the past debilitates one's efforts in the present. We have to keep pressing "toward the mark (goal) for the prize" of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

4. Why are spiritual mentors and spiritual disciplines so important?

Answer: Spiritual mentors are important because they teach us how to deal with imperfection and they model the process of pursuing the goal of Christlikeness. Also, the spiritual disciplines help us to "walk the line" or stay in line spiritually and keep progressing in sanctification by the same principles that have brought us thus far in our spiritual growth.

5. What does it mean to live as an "enemy" of Christ?

Answer: Implied in Paul's language is that these men did not claim to oppose Christ, His work on the cross, or salvation by grace alone through faith alone, even so they did not pursue Christlikeness in manifest godliness. Apparently, they were posing as friends of Christ, and possibly had even reached positions of leadership in the church.

6. It grieved Paul to see people living and dying without Christ. On the other hand, thoughts of the world to come gave him great joy. How would you describe these two different ideas?

Answer: Paul, though not perfect, was grieved to see those that were enemies of the cross of Christ:

- "whose end is destruction": The Greek word for "end" refers to one's ultimate destiny. The Judaizers were headed for eternal damnation because they depended on their works to save them.
- "whose god is their belly": This may refer to the Judaizers' fleshly accomplishments, which were mainly religious works. For an example, the belief that keeping dietary laws were necessary for salvation.
- "and whose glory is in their shame": The Judaizers boasted of their self-effort; but even the best of their accomplishments were no better than filthy rags or dung (**vv. 7-8; Isa. 64:6**).

Paul was so grieved by these things that he said he had told the Philippians about them often, even while weeping.

On the other hand, Paul had great joy and eagerly awaited the second coming of Christ. He was looking forward to the transformation of the believer's lowly bodies into glorious bodies like Christ's resurrected body. This was a motivation that gave him joy and kept Paul pressing forward.

INSPIRATION

When he (the author, Max Lucado) was a young man, he had plenty of people to wipe away his tears. He had two big sisters who put him under their wings. He had a dozen or so aunts and uncles. He had a mother who worked nights as a nurse and days as a mother—exercising both professions with tenderness. He even had a brother three years his elder who felt sorry for him occasionally.

But when he thought about someone wiping away his tears, he thought about his dad. His dad's hands were callused and tough, his fingers short and stubby. And, when his father wiped away a tear, he seemed to wipe it away forever. There was something in his touch that took away more than the drop of hurt from his cheek. It also took away his fear.

John says that someday God will wipe away your tears. The same hands that stretched the heavens will touch your cheeks. The same hands that formed the mountains will caress your face. The same hands that curled in agony as the Roman spike cut through, will someday cup your face and brush away your tears. Forever.

When you think of a world where there will be no reason to cry, ever, doesn't it make you want to go home?

John declares, "there will be no more death..." (**Revelation 21:4**). Can you imagine it? A world with no hearses or morgues or cemeteries or tombstones? Can you imagine a world with no spades of dirt thrown on caskets? No names chiseled into marble? No funerals? No black dresses? No black wreaths?

If one of the joys of the ministry is a bride descending the church aisle, one of the griefs is a body encased in a shiny box in front of the pulpit. It's never easy to say goodbye. It's never easy to walk away. The hardest task in this world is to place a final kiss on cold lips that cannot kiss in return. The hardest thing in this world is to say goodbye.

In the next world, John says "goodbye" will never be spoken. (From *The Applause of Heaven* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. Paul and the other apostles spoke and wrote frequently about heaven. What are some practical ways an eternal perspective can make a huge difference in your everyday life?
8. How can Christians avoid a sense of complacency in the spiritual life?
9. Why does Paul use the metaphor of a race to describe the Christian life? What does he mean by alluding to "the prize" (**verse 14**)?
10. Who are some older and wiser Christians you look to as examples? In what ways do you try to pattern your life after theirs?

Life Lessons from Philipians, Max Lucado, Author, Thomas Nelson, Inc; Philipians, MacArthur Bible Studies, John MacArthur, Author, Thomas Nelson, Inc; King James Open Bible, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

11. What would you do differently if you decided to live each day gripped by the reality that you are a citizen of heaven?

12. Paul mentions eagerly awaiting the return of Christ. Do you get excited by the thought of eternity with God? Why or why not?

LIFE LESSONS

There are so many ways to say it: “This earth is not our home.” “We are only passing through.” “I am bound for the Promise Land.” Given the fragility and brevity of this life and the certainty of the world to come, how should we live today? We need spiritual leaders and mentors who will exhort us to resist the fleeting attractions of this dying world. We need fellow pilgrims to journey with us along the path. Do you have such people in your life? Are you a vital part of a healthy Christian community? Ask God for strong Christian influences who can keep pointing you to the things that are true.

DEVOTION

Lord, thank you for the hope of heaven. Thank you for the promise that one day you will make everything right and all things new. Help us to become more and more convinced of this truth, with the result that we live with ever-increasing passion and power..

JOURNALING

What are your biggest questions about eternity?

Next Week: Lesson Ten: The Peace of God—**Philippians 4-1-7.**