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"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Phil. 3:7-14

These words were not written by a young enthusiast starting out on the Christian road. They are the testimony of a mature Christian towards the close of a rich and full life. Thirty years had passed since Paul's conversion. During those years, God had used him to establish many churches, mightily attesting his ministry with signs and miracles. From the start, Paul had spent himself unstintingly in the work of the gospel, travelling constantly and undergoing great hardships. He had come to know the reality of victory over sin as he grew in likeness to his Lord. And among his many joys he had had one unique experience of being, as he put it, lifted up into the third heaven to receive remarkable revelations of spiritual truth.

Yet at the end of all this, he states that he still has not attained to all that God had purposed for his life. Here is one of the greatest Christians of all time saying towards the end of his life that he still needs to press on to the goal. To most believers, alas, salvation begins and ends with the new birth and its assured escape from Divine judgment. Not so for the apostle, nor indeed for anyone else who seeks, like him, to be a true disciple of Christ. Here in this passage, he declares his firm belief that Christ had laid hold of him with a purpose. He, in return, was determined to lay hold of that purpose at any cost. This is a tremendous and solemn truth, that when the Lord lays hold of us at conversion, it is with a purpose extending far, far beyond just the saving of our souls out of hell fire and into heaven. If so mature a man as the apostle Paul had to say at the end of thirty years of untiring Christian service that he had not yet attained but had still to strive to fulfill all of God's purpose for his life, what a vast thing that purpose must be.

Paul goes even further in this passage. To him, everything that the world considers as precious is worthless rubbish when compared to this supreme objective of grasping the purpose of God and fulfilling it. He considers this a prize worth giving up everything in the world for (Phil. 3:14). When we look around us and see believers coveting worldly possessions and clinging to material things, giving these a greater place in their lives than the things of God, we are forced to conclude that their Christianity is very far removed from Paul's.

It is a mark of spiritual infancy to think of salvation only in terms of an insurance policy to escape the flames of Hell. When we mature spiritually, we realize that God has saved us in order that we might walk each day in the pathway that He has already planned for each one of us from eternity (Eph. 2:10). That pathway was what Paul called God's purpose for his life. If we are satisfied with having received His grace, but are uncommitted to fulfilling His will for our lives, then no matter how thoroughly evangelical we may be, we shall go through life without accomplishing anything of lasting value to God. Of course the Devil's first aim is, by one means or another, to blind people to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, thus preventing them from being saved (2 Cor. 4:4). But if he does not succeed there, then his next aim is to blind that new believer to the fact that God has a very definite plan for him. To a large extent he has succeeded here. There are thousands of true believers who never seek the will of God with any degree of earnestness, even in major decisions that they make in their lives.

The Christian life is depicted in this passage in Philippians as one in which we have to be continually pressing on. No degree of spiritual maturity attainable on earth will ever absolve us from this need of constant urgency. It is because many believers have neglected this lesson that they have no living testimony. Their only testimony relates to an experience in the distant past when on a blessed day they perhaps raised their hand or signed a decision-card in some evangelistic meeting. That was wonderful, but nothing has happened since! Prov. 24:30-34, with its picture of a garden gone to waste, describes the condition of the man who relaxes after his salvation. A garden requires constant weeding and caring, if it is to be guarded against weeds and nettles - and so does the human soul.

Understanding God's purpose and pressing on to attain it is not an optional extra for the spiritual elite. It should characterize the life of every true child of God.