

Pursuing Crowns

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You've got me for one more time this morning, and I thank you again for your willingness to journey with me in this worthy pursuit. Two weeks ago I set out to address a failure in my own life, namely the problem of misplaced affections. Why is it that when my alarm goes off in the morning, my heart would rather stay in bed than spend time with the Creator of the universe and the Savior of my soul? And why is it that, once I do get up, my attention drifts to all manner of lesser things? To the best of my ability, through the light of the Word, I suggested to you (and to myself), three culprits. Number one, I don't remind myself what's at stake each morning. Number two, I'm spending too much time on the spiritual sidelines. Number three, I'm trying to maximize my enjoyment now, rather than pursuing the lasting and perfect enjoyment that can only be attained in the life to come.

These three culprits relate to each other like this: I don't recognize what's at stake, because I'm not in the game, because I want to live life on my own leisurely terms. But what lies beneath this three headed monster? What is this spiritual lethargy anchored in? To put it bluntly, it is nothing less than a lack of faith, both in my view of hell and in my view of heaven. One day in hell is worse than a lifetime of bearing a cross, and one day in heaven is better than a lifetime of worldly indulgence. The man who gains the whole world but forfeits his soul profits nothing. Rather, he loses everything. Nevertheless, the profits of this world can be seen while the profits of eternity cannot. Here enters the conflict, the great fight of faith. Will God's promises be real enough and precious enough to us that we will forsake the competing claims of sin? Sin is what we do when we are not satisfied by that all that God is for us in Christ Jesus. Therefore, sin can only entice us when we are not satisfied in God. This means, of course, that the only way we can triumph over sin, in the long run, is to gain a distaste for it by finding a superior satisfaction in a right relationship with God. I am trying to feed this kind of faith by holding up for you two themes in the Bible, warning and reward. Last week my intention was to nurture a healthy sense of desperation lest we run in vain. I read warnings the likes of Hebrews 12:14 and Romans 6:22 which tell us that without holiness, without being sanctified, we will not see God. You could summarize that message like this: Be afraid. Hell is a terrible place, and those who won't deal radically with sin (which is only possible through spiritual regeneration) will go there.

This morning, my aim is to move from warning to reward, holding up a vision of God's heavenly glory that we might long for with all our being. I am going to do my best, in this short time we have together, to get out of the way of God's Word. It speaks for itself. Though extra-biblical insights and commentary can be extremely helpful, there is not much I can add to the lavish promises that Scripture makes itself. As we come before it today, I want the Spirit to wash over us that we may go home this afternoon and weep for joy that God would save such a people as us.

Last week I opened our time together with one of the more frightening portions of Scripture, Matthew 7:21-23:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord" shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!"

This morning I am happy to direct you to one of the most glorious portions in all of Scripture, namely Romans 8, the great eight! I'm going to read the bulk of it to you this morning, and I've broken it up this way. Romans 8: 1-4 deals with the gospel, Romans 8:12-18 speaks of reward, Romans 8:24-26 highlights the help our faith receives from the Spirit, Romans 8:28-32 declares that all things happen for our good (if we are united to Jesus), and Romans 8:35-39 speaks of our security in Christ.

Romans 8:1-4:

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God {did:} sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and {as an offering} for sin,

He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:12-18

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh -- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with {Him} so that we may also be glorified with {Him.} For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Romans 8:24-26

For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he {already} sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for {us} with groanings too deep for words;

Romans 8:28-32

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to {His} purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined {to become} conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God {is} for us, who {is} against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Romans 8:35-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If there is one verse in this glorious chapter that stands out even above all the rest, it would be for me verse 32: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" Hear those words and leap for joy. John 15:13 tells us that, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends," and we know from Romans 5:8-10 that Christ's love transcends even this standard because He died for us while we were yet His enemies. What Romans 8:32 tells us, then, is that since God has already paid the absolute highest price possible to redeem us from bondage to sin, He will, therefore, also pay all of the lesser prices to keep us. Eternal glory is guaranteed for those who are in Christ because there is nothing that can separate or steal us from God's hand!

Such glorious promises are not unusual in Paul's writings. They are littered throughout his epistles, and he holds them out to help spur the church on towards an ever fuller delight in all that God is for them in Christ Jesus. Those of us who have been going through *Closer Walk* this month, can attest to the fact that what Paul commends in his letters, he lives out in Acts. Paul preached reward, and Paul pursued reward. In Acts 20:22 we read,

Now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things

move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

He tells us in the next chapter that he is ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of his Lord (21:13), and yet he goes forth with joy! How is this possible? It's simple. For Paul, to live is Christ to die is gain (Philippians 1:21). He moved towards reward and knew that even if he lost everything that he had in this world, including his life, he was on his way to receiving something infinitely greater (Philippians 3:8)! In fact, the only thing on earth that Paul would likely miss was the opportunity to minister to and strengthen the saints, but even as this ministry came to a close, Paul is not without hope for those he leaves behind. He says in chapter 20, verse 32:

So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

We no longer have Paul or the apostles, but we do have the word of God's grace, the Bible, which is able to build us up and give us an inheritance among those who are sanctified! Paul commends to us God's Word as that which is able to give us an eternal and glorious inheritance (through the gift of sanctification). We learned last week that sanctification is the only path that leads to heaven, and Paul reminds us this morning that this is the only authoritative book which can direct us on that path. So let's go there with a view to the promises of reward, promises that should serve as an ever-present lighthouse on the often dark and dangerous seas of sanctification.

Genesis 15:1

After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I [am] thy shield, [and] thy exceeding great reward.

Psalm 19:9-11

The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward.

Psalm 58:11

And men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; Surely there is a God who judges on earth!"

Proverbs 11:18

The wicked worketh a deceitful work: but to him that soweth righteousness [shall be] a sure reward.

Proverbs 24:14

So [shall] the knowledge of wisdom [be] unto thy soul: when thou hast found [it], then there shall be a reward, and thy expectation shall not be cut off.

Phillipians 3:13, 14

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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 4:5-8

But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 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 a crown of

righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

James 1:12

Blessed [is] the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.

1 Peter 5:4

And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Rev 2:10,11

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

Did you notice that almost all of the promises of reward that we've read this morning are attached to conditions (like righteousness, perseverance, temperance or wisdom)? Lest you despair and think that such conditions are beyond you (which they are), remember what we learned last week. Sanctification is a gift. Progressively becoming more and more like Jesus can't be accomplished in our own strength, but it will be accomplished in those to whom the Spirit is given. James 1:12 promises a crown to those who resist temptation, and if you go back to I Corinthians, we'll see just how God makes this possible.

On our first Sunday together, I read to you from I Corinthians 9:24-27 where Paul urges the Corinthians to run in such a way that they may obtain, not a *perishable* crown, but an *imperishable* crown. Paul holds up the image of an eternal and imperishable crown and says, "Pursue it, be disciplined, be temperate, lest you run in vain and be disqualified." Last Sunday I continued in the next verse, and read through to chapter 10, verse 12. What we saw was a survey of the rebellion and demise of all those Israelites who saw the miraculous workings of God in their exodus from Egypt, only to perish in the dessert for their lack of faith. The warning to us: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." This morning, I'll continue with two final verses from this section, verses 13 and 14.

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

The good news in this verse is quite obvious. Every single time we are faced with temptation, God provides a way of escape. Every time. The bad news is that when we do sin, we are without excuse. We can blame nobody but ourselves. It's no good arguing that the devil made me do it, for the truth is, every time I yield to temptation I do so because I have rejected God's way of escape. Verse 13 is one of those pillar verses in Christianity that everyone seems to know. Verse 14, unfortunately, does not get so much attention, but it is no less significant. The "therefore" links verses 13 and 14 so we can say, "because God always provides a way of escape, therefore flee from idolatry!"

Idolatry may sound to some like an old fashioned sin, but the church should know better. Idolatry has and will forever remain at the heart of all sin. We make a god out of whatever we find the most pleasure in, meaning that if we do not find the most pleasure in the one, the only living and true God, then guess what, we are an idolator. That is why these questions of affections are so significant to me. That is why I am not content to get up in the morning and enter into prayer and study begrudgingly. If fellowship with God is mere duty and not delight, then my affections lie elsewhere and no matter what my hands or eyes are doing, my heart is mired in idolatry.

I know this morning was supposed to be about reward, not warning, but the reward that Scripture promises will only be received by those who heed present warnings. Warning and reward are so closely paired in scripture that there is really no way to separate them, nor should we. In drawing our time together to a close, let me try and make one practical suggestion concerning your affections (because you'll never gain victory over temptation if your affections

are misplaced). Don't be passive with them! Don't tolerate skewed appetites which long for the poisonous pleasures of sin rather than the perfect and everlasting pleasures of heaven. The next time that alarm goes off and you'd rather stay in bed, preach to yourself. That's the lesson of Psalm 42:5, 6

“Why are cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquited within me” Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance. O my God, my soul is cast down within me; Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan, And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar.”

When you feel defeated, depressed or worse, preach to your soul! That's what the Psalmist does. He is not content to wallow in discontent. He is proactive, knowing that God gives us no room to live in misery or lethargy. In fact God commands us to rejoice always (Phil 4:4). The Psalmist does this by reminding himself who God is, what God has done, and what God will do. We should do the same. Even when tragedy strikes and all hope seems gone, we have the example of Job, who wept bitter tears over the loss of family, health and wealth, but worshipped God through it all, knowing that the only One to whom his soul was anchored would never fail or falter. When our appetites are wayward, let us PROACTIVELY bring them back into submission. They are meant to serve us, not vice versa.

I opened our series together by examining the events of Matthew 26, which take place just before Christ's arrest where we see Jesus praying and the disciples sleeping. I want to return to that account to bring this message and series to a close. Though I have spoken of the necessity to have a faith that looks long, past the promises of immediate (and short lived!) pleasures, there is a simply irony in the Christian life that goes like this. When Peter's faith faltered and he fell, he was left in misery. Sin defaulted on it's promise once again. Yes, it kept him from potential arrest, but it left his soul mired in guilt and torment. Peter believed that it would go better for him to deny than to obey, but it did not. Later on however, after Pentecost, when Peter proclaimed allegiance to Christ and the gospel with great boldness, and even though it did cost him beatings and imprisonment, he rejoiced that he was counted worthy to suffer shame for Christ's name (Acts 5:41). And such is my experience as well, for I have never regretted an act of obedience or evangelical boldness, but I have often regretted their lack.

I'll close with an exhortation from Augustine.

How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose.....You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. YOU drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure, though not of flesh and blood, you who outshine all light, yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honor, though not in the eyes of men who see all honor in themselves....O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.

Let's pray.