

# The Prize of the On-High Calling

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of pursuing the prize of the on-high calling, which is conformity to the image of Christ and service in Christ Jesus, and forgetting the things which are behind to focus on the one thing we pursue.*

**Scripture:** Philippians 3:12

**Topics:** "Pursuit of God's Calling", "Overcoming Past Hindrances"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of pursuing the 'prize of the on-high calling' as articulated by Paul in Philippians. He clarifies that the essence of this pursuit is not merely about actions but about the object of our focus, which is the divine calling in Christ Jesus. Sparks encourages believers to forget past achievements and failures that may hinder their spiritual progress, urging them to adopt a singular focus on their heavenly calling. He highlights that this calling involves both conformity to Christ's image and active service in His ministry. Ultimately, he calls for a commitment to this pursuit, suggesting that true fulfillment and enrichment come from a life wholly dedicated to God's purpose.

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## Transcript

Reading: 2 Cor. 12:1; Phil. 3:12-14.

### The Overcomer's Declaration

We are going to gather up what we have already said, and present it in a simple and definite way. In the words which we have read, penned by Paul to the Philippians, we have the Overcomer's declaration, and it is gathered into a very small fragment of words. "One thing I do...". Before we can go further, we have to make a little adjustment, for Paul did not actually say, "One thing I do". You will notice the "I do" is in italics, which means that it is not in the original text. Paul said, "But one thing, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus". The verb "I do" is not there, but there is a verb which has to come in to make this statement intelligible, and the verb is found later - "One thing I pursue". That is the complete statement. "One thing I pursue". "I press on" - "pursue" is the better word. "One thing I pursue". Of course, it is quite right to say, "One thing I do", and I suppose in order to make the sentence simple for English readers the translators put those words in, but the correct, or the exact way of putting it is "But one thing, forgetting the things which are behind... I pursue..." "One thing I pursue". It brings the object of pursuit as the governing thing: not what I do, but the object. Paul is not saying, What I do is all-important. It

is the object that I have in view that is all-important. So we are at once brought in that way face to face with the object.

### The Object of the Overcomer

When we ask what the object is, he calls it "the prize of the on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus". You notice he has said, "Not as though I had already attained..." - it is not 'attained'. Properly, it is obtained and you can put in brackets there - 'the prize'. "But one thing I pursue - the prize of the on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus". The on-high calling has bound up with it, the prize.

### The On-High Calling

Let us weigh our words as we go along. "The on-high calling", the calling in Christ Jesus. Paul often used that word 'calling', and it is not what we mean when we say that someone called us. 'You called me', as you are called in the morning; or someone calls you across the road. That is not the idea of the word at all. It is what we mean when we speak of a calling or a vocation. 'This is my calling'. Paul used the two words in 1 Cor. 7:20. "Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called". They are two different Greek words. One is being called, the other is that to which a man is called. This latter word can be seen in Eph. 1:18; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 3:1; 2 Pet. 1:10. What he is saying is, Are you in this vocation or that? Do not seek to get out of it; abide in the calling wherein ye were called. The on-high calling, therefore, is a vocation which has to do with glory. It is that for which we have been apprehended or possessed. He says, "...that I may possess that for which I have become possessed by Christ Jesus"; and that possession is the prize of the on-high calling in Christ Jesus.

### "In Christ Jesus"

Now we must go to the end of the statement again, to that well-known and yet still-so-little understood formula - "In Christ Jesus". "The on-high calling in Christ Jesus". Our thought about that is usually as of the sphere which Christ represents, that Christ is a sphere; a certain specified and well-defined limit or circle. Well, that is quite true, but that is only half of it. That defines a bound and sets forth or indicates the exclusiveness of Christ. That is a realm, and you are either in that realm or out of that realm; you are in Christ or you are out of Christ, and it makes Christ a self-contained, settled, fixed realm of things, and there is no overlapping; it is either in or out.

But the other half is that it is the inclusiveness of Christ. It is what is inside that sphere. "In Christ" means that God has put everything of His thought and intention within Christ, it is all found there. All that God has designed is in Christ Jesus. It is a mighty fulness, inclusive and exclusive. You have none of it outside, but all of it in, and it is what is in Christ by the summing up of God the Father that is indicated by this - "the prize of the on-high calling in Christ Jesus". That is why I just took that little fragment from 2 Cor. 12:1 - "visions and revelations" of Christ. That is what we want to see - what is in Christ, visions and revelations. Have you ever for a moment paused to ask the question - How did Paul get to know all that he talks about? I pick up the letter to the Romans and I read through near to the end of the 8th chapter, and I hear Paul talking about things that happened before ever this world had an existence, going back into the very presence of God and hearing the Godhead talking between themselves, so to speak, and arranging things and saying what They were going to do. How did Paul get to know all that? Is this imagination? Paul has got it from heaven. You notice what he says, in 2 Cor. 12 "I know a man in Christ, fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not; or whether out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up even to the third heaven. And I know such a man (whether in the body, or apart from the body, I know

not; God knoweth), how that he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter". "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord". If they were not lawful for him to utter, they are not in the New Testament, but what is here is enough to get on with, and he intimates vast things, immense things, things altogether beyond our comprehension, things which will take eternity and the vast concourse of a countless host to understand, to enter into. "Visions and revelations of the Lord".

Amongst these visions and revelations, he has seen the on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus, he is intimating that there is such a thing, and he is telling us about his own attitude toward that thing, he is seeking with all his heart to get all believers to take the same attitude and to be of the same spirit and mind as himself. "I labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily" to "present every man complete in Christ" (Col. 1:28-29). It is the same thing. He has seen what is in Christ as the on-high calling of believers, and that object is before him. It is an immense thing represented by Christ in the purpose of God from eternity to eternity, and he sees that that thing, that immense thing in Christ, is the inheritance of the sons of God."...bringing many sons unto glory" (Heb. 2:10). It is the inheritance of sonship, and, as you so well know, sonship, according to the New Testament, is something more than spiritual childhood. It is the full-grown man spiritually, and this is the inheritance of the full-grown sons.

## Two Aspects of our Inheritance in Christ

### (a) Conformity to the Image of Christ

"The on-high calling". I could not, even if I stayed and if I tried, speak to my own satisfaction or yours of what that on-high calling is, because I do not know. I can only come with this tremendous impact that it is something very great, very glorious, and say that this is the object which makes Overcomers and will make the Overcomer company of which we have been speaking. It is this object, and it is this attitude which will do it. This is only an appeal, with a feeble presentation of the ground of appeal. It is what God has revealed in visions and revelations to Paul as to our inheritance in Christ, and it has two sides or two aspects.

Firstly, it has to do with His nature. God has wrought out in the Person of His Son in human manhood right through to completion His thought for the new race, the new creation; taking it to the depths where "He who knew no sin was made sin for us" (in our place), and raising it to the highest heights, placing it at His own right hand, glorifying it with His own glory, filling it with His own fulness, and so expressing Himself in that glorified humanity, telling us that that is the pattern to which He would conform us and has predestined us. "Foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). The Church is called to that and every part of it in its own measure to share that termed 'the fulness of him that filleth all in all' (Eph. 1:23) as to nature. This Church, of which we are parts, this Body of which we are members, is called to be so changed, firstly inwardly and finally outwardly, as to have the very glory that now fills Christ resting upon it. "A glorious church having the glory of God: her light was like unto a stone most precious" (Rev. 21:11); called unto his eternal glory (1 Pet. 5:10).

"I will come to visions and revelations", and the first one of those is what Paul saw on the way to Damascus and called "the heavenly vision". "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). He came to see by instruction of the Holy Spirit and by Divine revelation, heaven-given vision, that that which he saw on the Damascus road was the thing unto which he was called - to share that glory, to be glorified like that in Christ Jesus, and he says, That is the prize of the on-high calling! It has to do with our

nature being conformed to the nature of Christ, sinless, therefore capable of being endowed with Divine glory.

#### (b) Service in Christ Jesus

But the other half is that it has to do with service, the service that is in Christ Jesus; His work. "The on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus" - the work as well as the nature of Christ in glory. The New Testament has not a few intimations as to what the work of Christ is and is destined to be throughout the ages of the ages. It is to minister God to the creation, to fill the creation with God, to keep everything fed by God. God is life, God is love, God is everything that is glorious, and to be the agency, the vehicle, the vessel of ministering God to the creation is the consummate vision of the book of the Revelation, in the form of the city, in the form of that which is right at the centre of the city, upon which the city lives, from which it derives its life; the tree of life, the river of water of life, and then the leaves of the tree for the health of the nations. It is all a symbolic intimation that here is a great ministry centred in the Church in Christ Jesus; the Church, one with Christ Jesus, to minister life, health, glory and all that God is, beyond itself.

"The on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus". It is what is in Christ Jesus as to nature and purpose. We must not think that the glorification of the Lord Jesus is the end, an end in itself. Our glorification is not going to be an end in itself. God does not believe in ends; there is no end to Him and He does not believe in having ends. "Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end" (Isa. 9:7). That is not only a matter of time limit; that is a matter of expansion, dimension, increase. It does not mean that the increase of His Kingdom will not cease at a certain time, it means the increase itself will go on and on, fulness so boundless. The high calling in Christ Jesus is to maintain that eternal increase. You may think that this is extravagant language and very high talking, but I will come back to the practical thing in a moment, now, to ourselves.

#### Hindrances to the Pursuit of the Prize

We have already said in our previous meditations that the Church being gathered out of the nations in this dispensation, and being slowly formed into a vessel, and inwardly changed, and spiritually developed, is being prepared to receive the resurrection glory of Christ with a view to ministering that glory, being the agency of that glory in the Kingdom which is coming, the everlasting Kingdom, when the kingdom of this world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord and His Christ, invested with His glory. Now Paul by revelation had come to see what Christ risen and glorified signified as God's thought and intention, for the Church which is His Body, and he says, That is our calling, that is our destined vocation. Then, if that is the object that He has in view and presents to us, the Christian life is something very much more than getting converted, however much that may be - and it is a great thing. Never let us be content with that. The good can be the enemy of the best in that respect if we are not very careful. That being the object, there has got to be an attitude, and Paul says, As to the object, this is my attitude; one thing I pursue, I am a man of one object, and upon that object I bring everything to bear, to converge, so that one thing in all things becomes the only thing that matters. As to the past - forgetting. In this chapter of his own history, he refers to two things in the past, things which he deliberately forgets. They are two forms of things that could very much interfere with this pursuit to rob of this prize. In the first place he mentions the prizes of this world, the other prizes. The prize of inheritance; look at the chapter - what he inherited as a Hebrew of the Hebrews! What an inheritance! The prize of inheritance, the prize of status - a Pharisee. If you really get a thoroughbred Pharisee, you have the embodiment and personification of status. Then there was attainment, he was a scholar of the best school. And so much more in that realm of prizes here. He says in

effect, if I rest upon anything of worldly prizes, worldly status, anything at all that I have or am as to this world, it will interfere with this quest and get in the way of that prize, so I forget it, deliberately forget it, I banish it from my mind.

Beware, young people. The enemy can offer you prizes in order to steal the prize from you, he can substitute for the prize - and I am not saying that there are not prizes so far as this world goes. There are prizes, there are things for which men barter their souls and when they have got them, they find them wholly empty at the end. Beware of the counter-prizes. If you are going to be an Overcomer, you have got to be like this Overcomer and say, These things do not count so far as this one thing is concerned, those things must take a subservient place. You may say, I am successful! Do not say you are successful until you can say you have got the prize of the on-high calling. It is an attitude - forgetting those things for the one thing. This does not mean that you should accept a low or meagre level of life and work, and be second or third-rate people. It only means that the chief end should overshadow all else.

Then he refers to another side which he deliberately forgets, which can equally retard the progress and arrest the advance and slow the step. "Persecuting the church" - he speaks of that to this church. The blind folly of yesterday, the blindness and ignorance of the past and what I did in it. Oh, Satan is so ready to bring up our past to paralyse us. The foolishness, the weakness, the mistakes, the blunders, the sins - yes, he is always bringing those up and saying, This disqualifies you, puts you out of the running, this prize is not for you! Look at yourself, look what kind of history you have! And Paul says, I put that out of the way, I am not going to be discouraged by past failures. An Overcomer must not be discouraged by past failure, though that has been repeated. If ever there was one who should have felt himself disqualified for this prize, it was this man. I persecuted the Church, I consented to Stephen's death, I held the clothes of the witnesses; I pursued the saints into distant cities, I cast into prison both men and women; I can never hope to be awarded that prize! Ah no! "Forgetting the things which are behind". "But one thing".

I have often said that I think Paul really did have a hand in the writing of Hebrews; whether he actually wrote it or not, he is there, and you remember - "Let us... lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking off unto Jesus" (Heb. 12:1-2). The weights that impede, hold back, the sin so easily besetting - what is it? There is no chapter division in Paul's letter, we have to run straight on. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for the proving of things not seen... By faith... By faith... Let us lay aside... the sin which doth so easily beset us". If we are going to run, all unbelief, all doubt, all questioning must go; the easily besetting sin of doubt, unfaith, must be stripped and laid aside to run this race unto this prize. "I forget". The Lord would have us forget in that sense anything that would get in the way of this attitude. As to the past, I forget. As to the present, I gird myself, I press, I pursue. I may be a doctor, a teacher, a nurse or anything, but in and through all things, I have one object and my earthly calling, earthly vocation, earthly business, must be made the sphere in which this end is pursued. It must not be the thing in itself and the end in itself, but my occasion, my opportunity and my means of learning Christ. There is plenty in everyday life to make a real knowledge of Christ necessary, and so we should turn everyday life to use, in its adversities, its trials, its difficulties, to gain Christ, to know Christ. It is a present thing, it is not all in the future. It is a present thing, this movement to the great consummation.

Let us get this word - I pursue. In Phil. 3, that word occurs twice. You will not find it in the translation. Paul says he persecuted the Church. That is exactly the same word as he uses here - I Pursue. It sounds strange to say. I persecute the prize of the on-high calling, but you can see the meaning. How did Paul persecute the Church? Well, he did it very thoroughly and he stood at nothing, he let nothing get in his

way. He went the whole way in persecution and not only men, but women; this thing related to Jesus of Nazareth had to go, lock, stock and barrel, and he would not spare himself until this was done! That is the spirit of Saul of Tarsus. He says, I bring that spirit right over in relation to Christ. He uses the same word. That is the spirit of the Overcomer, nothing less than that will do.

### The Present Practical Value

I must close here by coming to that which I suggested just now would come back to us before we finished - the present practical value of this. It all looks so future, so heavenly, so beyond, but it is not. Dear friends, we should be very, very much the poorer if all this in the New Testament through and by the Apostle Paul was not there. I mean, how impoverished we should be had we not got what Paul brought, what the Lord has given us through that dear man. He never knew it was going to be like that.

He wrote some letters out of his heart for some immediate local or localised situations and needs, to help curtail people in certain places over certain present difficulties and problems. He never knew they were going to be "The Epistles of Paul", lasting two thousand years, read the world over, fed upon and building up the Church for which he had such a concern, and bringing multitudes into greater fulnesses of Christ. There it is, and it is all due to this attitude and what he was prepared to pay in taking this attitude, of being of this mind and this spirit.

That is where the practical thing is. If you are going to be an Overcomer of this sort, if you are going with the Lord wholly and utterly, to persecute in this thorough-going way God's full end, to pursue it like this and pay the price - do not do it with this motive and object - there is undoubtedly going to be tremendous enrichment of others, and the fact is, and it is a settled law, that the enrichment of others can only come in this way. Those who will not pay the price forfeit the fruitfulness.

The real values of Christ have come all the way through the centuries through men after this sort, men of this mind. You may say that you are not a Paul, you are not a great person in the Church. No, but greatness is not measured by what you are in yourself. Your greatness and your value and your fruitfulness will be according to the utterness of your abandonment to God's full thought. He will see to the rest, and many will thank God that you paid the price, that you suffered for an utter way for the Lord, that you counted not the cost too great.

That is the way of fruitfulness, and that is how it is that Paul has been such an enriching factor, simply because of his attitude, his spirit, because he carried this out. "One thing...". Not a man of divided interest, an iron in every fire. "I pursue the prize of the on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus". Because he so pursued, saints have been enriched and helped, strengthened and made full in every age since. That is possible, it is true. If you go the whole way and suffer with the Lord for His full purpose, that in itself will be the way of the enrichment of others, and that is where the thing is so practical.

It comes down out of the ethereal, the merely visionary. You be out and out for the Lord and many will get the benefit. And so, as we have been saying, by a remnant the whole Church comes into blessing. The remnant satisfies God and then the whole is benefitted because God is satisfied.

The Lord make us of this spirit, of this kind. "One thing I pursue".

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