

“You may have already won \$10,000,000!” said the flyer. It was from a company called American Family Publishers. Surely you remember them. Their main spokesperson was a famous television personality named Ed McMahon, Johnny Carson’s sidekick—for those old enough to remember Johnny Carson. Notice the clever wording. **“You may have already won . . .”** implying that it was a done deal . . . and you were the winner. American Family Publishers folded a few years ago. A similar company, Publishers Clearing House, is still in business—also selling magazines by promising major prizes to their winners. I’m not going to ask how many of you have ever returned one of their entry forms. Some of you are still probably receiving magazines that you first purchased from American Family Publishers or Publishers Clearing House years ago.

Somehow in 1997, a church—the Bushnell Assembly of God in Bushnell, Florida—got on the mailing list of the American Family Publishers. A computer somehow twisted the name of the church, and a sweepstakes notice was addressed to “God of Bushnell” and was sent to the church address.

The accompanying letter read like this, “Dear God, We’re searching for you. You’ve been positively identified as our \$11,000,000 mystery millionaire!” I’ll bet God was excited about that!

The letter went on to say, “What an incredible fortune there would be for God! Imagine the looks you’d get from neighbors. But don’t just sit there, God, come forward now and claim your prize!”

We’re not told if God returned the order blank or not. Certainly, for most of us lowly humans, \$11,000,000 would be a substantial prize. However, for God, I doubt that it would buy one tiny piece of pavement on the streets of gold.

Our lesson for the day from Philippians tells us that Saint Paul wanted to win a prize, but it wasn’t mere money that he was seeking. Actually, he wanted more than \$11,000,000. He wanted a prize of infinite value. He writes, **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.**

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

St. Paul had one goal in mind, and he was straining with all his might to attain that goal, and that was...TO KNOW JESUS CHRIST...—to know him in his death on the cross and to know him in the power of his resurrection. No wonder St. Paul had such a lasting impact on the world. It makes a real difference in your life when you know what your goal in life is, and when you give yourself unreservedly to that goal.

A few years ago, a pair of South American men decided on the spur of the moment and without first informing their families, to go out in a small boat to do some fishing in the ocean. Unfortunately, their motor failed, and the currents swept them out into the vastness of the Atlantic. Within hours they no longer could see the coastline. Weeks of hunger and thirst, sunburn and fear passed by as they struggled to survive on the few fish they were able to catch, and the meager amount of rainwater they could capture.

Both men were strong and fit, but six weeks after the start of their ordeal, one man succumbed to despair and died. The other, however, clung to the hope of seeing his mother again. He passionately wanted to spare her the grief his disappearance and presumed death would bring. And this hope sustained him until, many weeks later, at last a freighter happened upon him and rescued him.

Think of that! This surviving castaway dared to hope he’d see his mother again, and that may very well have been a factor in his survival. *It makes a real difference in your life when you know what your goal is and when you give yourself unreservedly to that goal. Not that you will always achieve your goals.*

Tony Campolo tells a humorous story about a friend of his who attended a prayer meeting where people shared with each other about how God could answer prayer. One elderly missionary told how she had gone to the mission field wanting very much to be married. The other missionaries who worked with her were all married and had good companionship. She longed for the same companionship these couples enjoyed. **She had prayed long and hard for a husband, but it had not happened.**

Out of curiosity, one of the women in the group inquired, “But why is it that in spite of your many prayers that you never got married?” The elderly missionary woman smiled as she answered, *“Somewhere there is a 70-year-old man who has been fighting the will of God for 50 years!”*

We don’t always fulfill our dreams, but having a compelling goal is a vital ingredient in an effective and successful life.

Unfortunately, many Christians do not have a clear understanding of what God expects from them.

Bible scholar William Barclay told of a dog he had once owned. Rusty, a bull terrier, would accompany Barclay on walks down through the meadow and beside a stream. When they reached the stream, Rusty had a passion for plunging into the water, locating a rock on the bottom of the stream, getting it in his mouth, and bringing it to the bank. He would carefully deposit the stone some distance from the water’s edge, and then go for another one.

Time and again he would fetch his treasured rock, repeating the process for hours—if so allowed. Barclay asked this question: “What is the point of retrieving rocks from the bottom of a stream for this dog?” So far as he could determine, there was none. The exercise served no discernible purpose at all. Barclay then observed that this is the way many Christians are. They seem to be going through the same monotonous routine every day, but without a purpose; with no projected goal. They appear not to know what their reason for existing actually is. Barclay suggests these people operate on a “dog” level.

Now let me hasten to say that you’re not going to hell if you don’t have a distinct purpose for your life. Some people blunder through life quite nicely with no discernible purpose, but you won’t find life as fulfilling as you would if you knew you were fulfilling God’s plan for your life.

It was the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, who wrote, **“Most of the people I see suffer not from physical illness, but from spiritual aimlessness. They have lost their aim.** They have lost sight of who they really are and what is really valuable.” The happiest people in this world are people who know God’s will for their life and seek with all their hearts to live according to God’s will.

An Australian website recently carried a story of a young man named Peter who happened on a purpose for his life in an unusual way. Peter’s life had a most unpromising beginning. At age nine he was put into an institution for running away from foster homes. By the time he was an adult, he had been in and out of jail for many years and had reached a point where he was selling \$40,000 worth of drugs a day.

After a heavy-handed police raid, Peter started to re-evaluate his life’s direction. It was then that God revealed Himself to Peter in a very tangible way. One day, Peter heard God say to him quite distinctly, “Peter, I want you to follow Me.” Over and over he heard that command. Feeling troubled, and not knowing the source of that voice, Peter jumped on his motorbike to try to escape it . . . until his brand, new motorbike broke down.

Covered in tattoos and dripping with jewelry, Peter decided to hitch a ride back to town. A young couple picked him up, and after a few minutes, the driver turned around and said, “I feel like I’ve got to tell you something. *God’s telling me to tell you that He loves you, and He has a plan and a purpose for your life.*” With that, Peter became emotional and asked to be dropped off to collect himself.

The next car picked him up, and the driver had basically the same message. God loves you and He has a plan and a purpose for your life. And so did a third driver in the next car! It’s hard to believe, but three times in one day Peter received practically the same message from three different people. The next day was Sunday so Peter decided that he had better go to church. And when the pastor gave an invitation to Christian discipleship Peter

went forward and gave his life to Christ. Now, Peter's the Founder and CEO of Shalom House in Western Australia, a live-in rehabilitation facility that is bringing restoration to the lives of men and families in the community.

It's said that God moves in mysterious ways. God certainly moved in a mysterious way in Peter's life. Today he has a firm direction for his life, and he is making his life count for something significant.

Peter's experience was similar to St. Paul's Damascus Road experience. Remember, St. Paul was on a journey to persecute Christians. As he neared Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

From that day forward, St. Paul was determined to do and to be what he believed Christ had called him to do and to be. There was no turning back once he had this vision of Christ. **Quitting for him was not an option.** **"But one thing I do,"** he wrote, **"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."** For St. Paul, his journey would not be finished until he stepped through heaven's gate.

It's like a scene in an Irving Stone's novel, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. In this inspiring novel, Pope Julius had given Michelangelo a most difficult assignment. The sculptor was to go to the blue hills of Carrara and quarry out a tomb for the pope. Michelangelo, selected the finest foreman available in all of Italy to lead the expedition. They hired a fine crew and together set out to fulfill the task. For a long time, they labored but finally the crew gave up. Gilberto, the foreman spoke for them all when he said to Michelangelo, "We've had it. We've tried. It's enough. We can't do it. We're quitting."

Michelangelo looked Gilberto steadily in the eye and said, *"I can understand if you must quit, but I hope you will understand when I say that I cannot quit. I will find another crew. I will find another foreman. And then I will come back and complete the task, because I am under the assignment of the Holy Father."* And with renewed determination, Michelangelo devoted himself to the task at hand.

Michelangelo did not quit, because he was under the assignment of the Holy Father, the Pope. In the same way, St. Paul did not quit because he was under the assignment of his Heavenly Father. **And he believed a prize awaited him—the grandest prize of all—THE PRIZE OF KNOWING CHRIST.**

I don't believe that St. Paul fell short of his goal. I believe he came to know Christ in both his death and resurrection. **In fact, I believe that everyone who seeks to know Christ will one day attain that prize—and it will be the prize above all prizes.**

"I want to know Christ," wrote St. Paul, *"yes, to know the power of his resurrection and sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."*

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of THE GOAL for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." **ARE YOU READY TO WIN SUCH AN AMAZING PRIZE? Amen.**